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# BANDWAGON

JOURNAL OF THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**1882**

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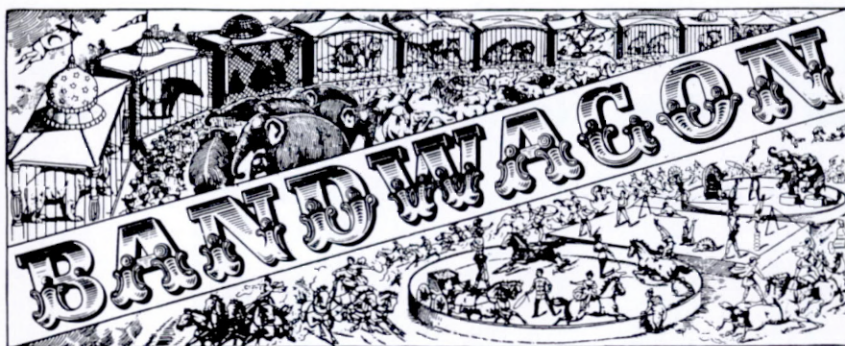
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SOLE OWNER OF THE GREATEST OF ALL GREAT SHOWS.

**ANNUAL.**

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1983





## THE JOURNAL OF THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Vol. 27, No. 5

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1983

Fred D. Pfening, Jr. Editor

Joseph T. Bradbury and Fred D. Pfening III, Associate Editors

BANDWAGON, The Journal of the Circus Historical Society, is published bi-monthly. Editorial, Advertising and Circulation office is located at 2515 Dorset Rd., Columbus, Ohio 43221. Advertising rates are: Full page \$85.00, Half page \$45.00, Quarter page \$25.00. Minimum ad \$18.00. Phone (614) 294-5361.

Subscription rates \$16.00 per year to members, \$16.00 per year to non-members in the United States, \$18.00 per year outside the U.S.A. Single copies \$2.50 each plus 90¢ postage.

BANDWAGON (USPS 406-390) is published bi-monthly at \$16.00 per year by the Circus Historical Society, 800 Richey Rd., Zanesville, Ohio 43701. Second class postage paid at Columbus, Ohio. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to BANDWAGON, 1075 West Fifth Ave., Columbus, Ohio 43212.

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### THIS MONTH'S COVER

Adam Forepaugh was born in 1831 and died in 1890. After an association with "Pogey" O'Brien, he opened his own circus in a permanent building in Philadelphia in 1865. In the spring of 1866 his show opened under canvas, which he operated until his death.

The cover illustration is from the cover of the courier used by the Forepaugh show during the 1882 season. That season it featured Adam Forepaugh, Jr., presenting twenty-one elephants, including the famous Bolivar. The large circus carried a rhinoceros, a hippopotamus, a giraffe, a tamanour, and a white tapir. The show was presented in two rings. The spec was Lalla Rookh's Departure from Delhi, featuring Miss Louise Montague, the famous ten thousand dollar prize beauty.

The courier was printed by the Courier Company of Buffalo, New York. The original is in the Pfening Archives.

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|---|-------|

### CHRISTMAS ISSUE ADVERTISING NEEDED

The Christmas special November-December issue of the *Bandwagon* is traditionally the largest of the year. This is made possible by your help in placing Christmas Greetings ads in the issue. A number of circuses have supported the issue with advertising in this issue over the years.

But your help is also needed. Support your magazine with an ad this year. The advertising rates are: Full page \$85.00, Half page is \$45.00, Quarter page is \$25.00, minimum ad is \$18.00. When possible we will appreciate receiving camera-ready copy that can be reproduced without the cost of typesetting.

- |   |       |
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## ARTICLE AVAILABLE

The Summer 1983 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* contains an article entitled "The Circus in America," by CHS President Richard Flint. It includes photographs of many rare 19th century posters, several of which are in color. To order, send \$5.00 to the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Be sure to specify the Summer 1983 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*.

## SEASON'S REVIEW PHOTOS WANTED

Information and illustrations concerning circuses on tour during the 1983 season will be published in the January-February 1984 issue of the *Bandwagon*.

The review will be written by Fred D. Pfening III. If you have a newspaper ad, photo, or a photo of an unusual poster that you feel is worth sharing in this article please send it to the editor. We are most interested in any unusual happening that occurred in your area. Material on shows that were new in 1983 are especially needed.

## Correction

An attentive reader has noted an error in Stuart Thayer's article "James Raymond's Four Elephant Team" in the July-August 1983 *Bandwagon*. On page 30, column 3, appears the sentence, "There had

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not been so few [shows] since 1831 when seven circuses and one menagerie started the season." It has been pointed out that more menageries toured that year.

Thayer clears up the matter: "I am guilty of carrying over my research methods to my writing without explaining my terms. I divide menageries into those with and those without keepers, and do not chronicle the latter. Thus I meant 'seven circuses and one major menagerie,' or some such. In actuality there were ten menageries on the road in 1831, nine of which did not use a keeper."

## CHS Election Upcoming

CHS President Dick Flint has appointed Fred Dahlinger election commissioner. If you wish to nominate a member as a national officer or director, please mail the nomination before November 15 to Dahlinger at 743 Beverly Park Place, Jackson, Michigan 49203. Directors can be nominated only by members from that Division. The current officers have expressed a willingness to serve another two years. A ballot will be enclosed with the November-December *Bandwagon*.

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## JOSEPH ORI AND THE EARLY CIRCUS AIR CALLIOPE

by Fred Dahlinger, Jr.

*A version of this paper was read at the 1983 Circus Historical Society Convention at Akron, Ohio.*

A sound which is symbolic of the outdoor amusement world is that of the calliope, an instrument now foreign to the ears of many, but which elicits joy and happiness in those same listeners after releasing only a few lilting notes. The word calliope usually brings to mind the steam powered whistler which was the signature of the circus, the floating theatre and the excursion steamboat. Its softer cousin, the air calliope, is seldom mentioned, its once common presence pushed into the background by memories of the more impressive steamers.

The air calliope was one of the most popular and plentiful mass entertainment musical instruments of the twentieth century. Considered as a group, the number of air calliopes constructed approaches that of the numerous bandorgans built and distributed by both domestic and foreign

The Ringling air calliope with a Pneumatic machine is shown on the lot, circa 1917. Note that the trim around the front wheel has been torn up; it was later repaired. J.W. Beggs Collection.

Tommy Comstock was the best known air calliope player of the 1930's and 1940's. He is pictured here playing an Ori calliope with the big show band on Cole Bros. Circus in the 1940's. Pfening Archives.

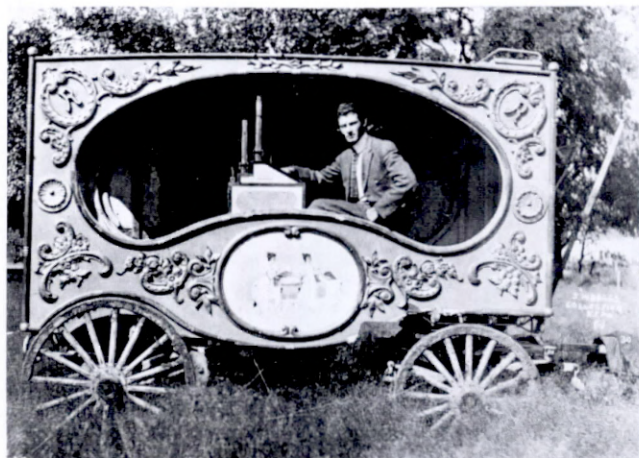
builders and agents. Several thousand were made, of which over a hundred survive today, primarily in the hands of collectors and museums. Surprisingly little has been written about the instrument or its history, but thankfully that which is in print is generally accurate, though sketchy.<sup>1</sup>

The origins of the air calliope are ancient, its roots traceable to the pipe organs of Roman times. For practical purposes, it can be said the story of the air calliope starts much later, its beginnings associated with the first use of steam calliopes as advertising tools by the American circus of the 1870's. The steam calliope became a fixture of the circus in 1872, when the Great Eastern show featured a "steam piano" as part of its advertising assault on the residents. Within the decade the majority of the larger rail shows featured one of these devices at the end of their parades. It also served to dispense a ballyhoo on the lot im-

mediately before show time. The bulk and expense of this limited duty asset restricted the acquisition of a steam calliope to the upper tier shows, those which had an adequate bankroll to purchase and transport one of the awkward and expensive instruments. Capable of delivering the loudest possible notice that the show was in town, the calliope was on the wish list of many showmen who needed a guaranteed method of advertising their presence.

The need to announce the show's arrival was not restricted to circus men, but shared by all showmen, including floating theatre owners, road show proprietors and street fair operators. The first step towards satisfying the needs of the lesser showmen was taken by George Kratz, the noted steam calliope builder from Evansville, Indiana. Developing an instrument quite different from those built previously,

The rarely photographed Barnum & Bailey air calliope wagon is tucked behind the Clown and Horn steam calliope in this 1920 Ringling-Barnum shot. Its overall appearance was quite similar to the Ringling air calliope. Joseph T. Bradbury Collection.







The Al G. Barnes Circus acquired one of Joe Ori's calliopes in 1914, and mounted it in a truck. The three level cascading whistle arrangement of the Pneumatic calliopes can be seen clearly in this photo taken by Charles Bezucha about 1916. C. Bernie Beerntsen Collection.

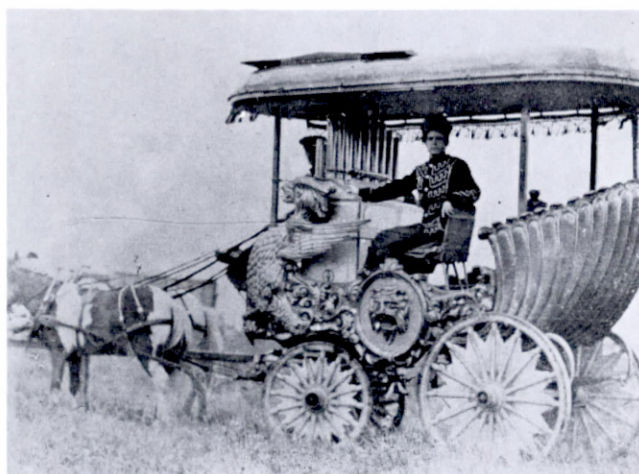
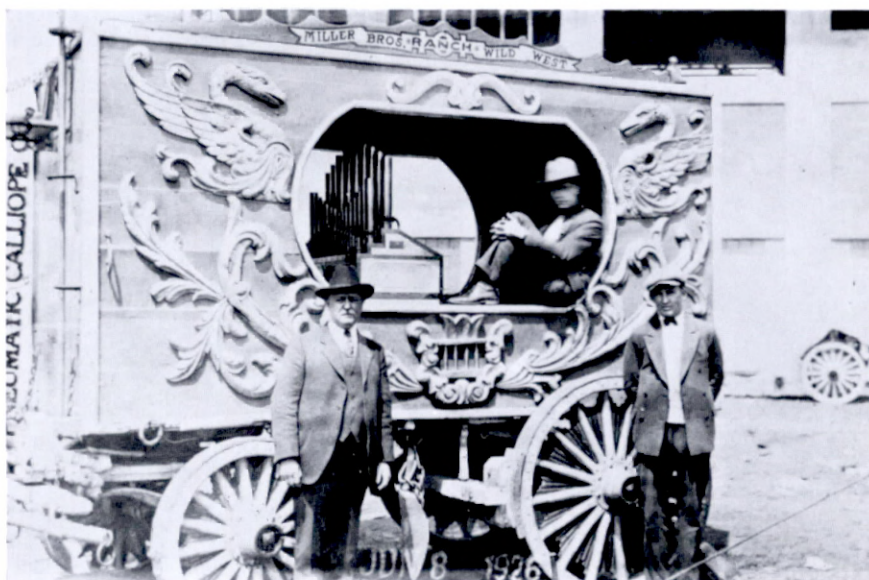
Kratz constructed a small calliope about 1903 utilizing a semi-circular manifold which could be operated by steam or compressed air. The volume of either medium required to operate the miniature calliope was but a fraction of that needed to operate one of the full size steamers. While the air pressure used to operate these Kratz hybrids is not known, it is believed to have been in the ten to fifty pounds per square inch range. The employment of compressed air to power a calliope had been foreseen years earlier by Joshua C. Stoddard, who covered its use in one of the claims of his 1855 calliope patent. There is no known record of a calliope being operated by compressed air prior to Kratz's efforts, the application of compressed air apparently being stifled by the lack of a reasonably sized portable air compressor.

Kratz's new calliope was well received, close to 30 instruments being accounted for in a recent survey. Others tried to build compressed air calliopes, and one firm even offered to convert steam calliopes to compressed air service, but all of these activities were rather short-lived episodes. The advent of the compressed air calliope satisfied the needs of some showmen; however, a wagon to carry its weight, and a knowledgeable individual to operate it were still required.

Road shows and street fair operators who gillyed their shows from baggage cars, sometimes in conjunction with that new travel invention, the automobile, required a very portable instrument, one capable of being

moved by the efforts of one to two men. It also had to be sufficiently simple to permit operation by the multitude of piano artists common in the industry. Although efforts dating to the 1890's can be cited, the first successful low pressure air calliope was constructed in 1905-1906 by Joseph Ori, a longtime showman who was then serving as barker, accordion player, and mechanic for Capt. Louis Sorcho's Deep Sea Divers show. Sorcho's business had been sagging during a tour of the western United States, and after dismissing the steam calliope as too heavy and too costly, Ori told Sorcho he believed that he could construct an air powered calliope. Possibly he was inspired by the machinery used to feed air to the di-

Joseph Ori is the man on the left in this 1926 view of the 101 Ranch Wild West's air calliope. Note the distinctive three level arrangement of the whistles. The wagon featured carvings originally mounted on a Forepaugh-Sells tableau den. A. Bruce Tracy Collection.



Before the Harp and Jesters wagon was built, Hagenbeck-Wallace installed their 1915 Pneumatic calliope in the old Great Wallace eagle chariot for a season or two. The adjustable siren whistle can be seen above the player's right arm. Otto Scheiman Collection.

vers in Sorcho's glass fronted show tank.

Hampered by having to work on the road but aided by the machine tools Sorcho commonly carried, Ori succeeded in creating an air calliope which proved an invaluable asset to Sorcho's show wherever it traveled. With the calliope mounted in the back seat position on an early roadster, Sorcho would drive the vehicle around the towns and cities being visited for hours on end, making sure no citizen could escape the fact that his show was in town. Travelling with Sorcho's show for the next four years, Ori had to leave the calliope behind when he left Sorcho's employ in 1910, settling in Bloomfield, New Jersey, with his brother, James, and determined to



# AIR CALLIOPE



If you are looking for some "CHEAP EXCESS BAGGAGE" we don't have it, but if you want good workmanship, a good flash and a real KROUD KATCHER, the only place to get it is only 45 MINUTES FROM BROADWAY.

**PNEUMATIC CALLIOPE CO., 403 Broad Street, Bloomfield, N. J.**

The only practical AIR CALLIOPE builders in the WORLD. Order now for season 1915.

earn a living by building air calliopes.

Ori was not the only individual to build a low pressure air calliope at the time, but since his machines embodied the general design principles which were later mimicked by others, he can rightly be considered the father of the air calliope. It took about 3 or 4 calliopes before this standard arrangement was reached, but by the time the fifth calliope was sold to the Johnny J. Jones carnival, Ori's design had become fixed. The details which characterized Ori's calliopes include a free standing group of chromatic brass whistles, connected via tubing to a valve chest, the valves operated by a set of keys having the same arrangement as a piano keyboard. The whistles sat atop a compact sheet metal enclosure with the whistles arranged in an attractive manner in front of the keyboard. Air was supplied by a rotary blower, such as those manufactured by the Roots firm of Connersville, Indiana. Altogether the air calliope and its blower weighed 200 to 300 pounds and could easily be moved about by two

A Pneumatic calliope replaced one of Kratz's hybrid machines when this wagon went from Sig Sautelle's Circus to Leon Washburn's Carnival. This Pneumatic ad is from the March 21, 1914 *Billboard*. Author's collection.

men. As examples of designs which were not successful, one can cite the bamboo whistle calliopes of the Armbruster Company or the peculiar calliopes made by Sam Day which were powered by the exhaust of automobiles. Any four cylinder automobile had adequate exhaust pressure to power one.

The air calliopes operated at pressures which were a fraction of those used by compressed air calliopes. Early air machines operated at pressures as high as several pounds per square inch, but later instruments were tun-

The big 49 whistle Pneumatic air calliope was at the center of attention in this group photo of Ned Brill's 35 piece band on the Barnum and Bailey show in 1915.



ed to function at levels of one pound or less.

By 1912 Ori had established his firm, the Pneumatic Calliope Company, and moved it from a Newark storefront to a Bloomfield building. Known as Joseph E. Dupont among the showfolk, Ori's ability to produce calliopes was outstripped by the demand. Made with only hand powered tools and the assistance of his brother and nephews at night, the early Ori calliopes were essentially handmade and were not made to order, but simply sold after Ori advised showmen that another calliope was ready.

It was the Ringlings who first attempted to purchase an Ori calliope in early 1912, dispatching John H. Snellen from the Barnum show at Bridgeport to Ori's plant with the intent of having an instrument delivered to Baraboo prior to April 1. The Ringlings were acting in response to a letter from Ori, but wanted the unit inspected before committing themselves, desiring to be assured that the Pneumatic calliope was a practical and rugged unit. Snellen sent a favorable report to the Ringlings, but by the time the authorization for the purchase was received Ori had already sold the instrument to another party.

Not wanting to miss the opportunity to place one of his units on the World's Greatest Shows, Ori again wrote the Ringlings on January 9, 1913 offering another air calliope, characterizing it as "positively the best we ever built." Ori advised the Ringlings he would hold the unit long enough to permit both an inspection by one of their representatives and a positive response to be received from Baraboo. The calliope, complete with a blower, small tank, siren whistle, and a pedal to alter the volume, was offered for \$625.00, a base or stand being \$25.00 extra.<sup>2</sup> Acting quickly, the Ringlings wrote the Barnum & Bailey show manager, Sam McCrackin, two days later, informing him of the 1912 mixup, and advising McCrackin to take Snellen along to the Pneumatic plant. They suggested closing the deal on the spot if the instrument was satisfactory.<sup>3</sup>

On January 15, 1913, McCrackin and Snellen visited the Pneumatic plant, and after hearing several selections bought one of the instruments for the Ringling show. Before leaving the premises they purchased a second one for the Barnum show, Ori confirming the orders in a telegram to the Ringlings the same day. McCrackin wrote Al Ringling on January 16, advising him that the purchase price had been discounted from \$650 to \$600 and noting that "The tone of the Calliope is more musical and carries farther than the steam [calliope] and is a very small affair."<sup>4</sup>

As instructed by McCrackin, Ori also wrote the Ringlings on January



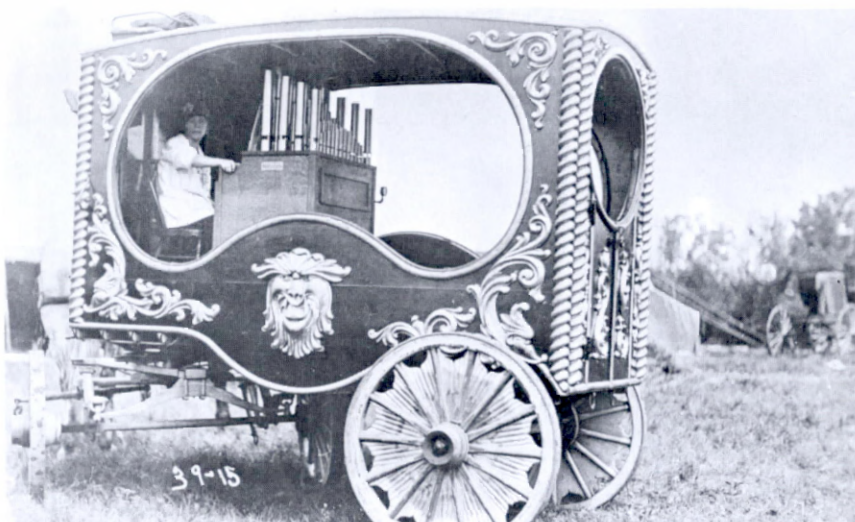
16, describing the calliopes which were sold as having 43 whistles, ranging from F to B, not including the adjustable siren whistle. The show had to provide the gas engine to power the blower, a 2 or 3 horsepower unit being required. A good muffler was recommended to avoid having the exhaust interfere with the music. Ori also confirmed the price discount of \$50 on the Ringling calliope, but advised \$100 had been cut from the Barnum show unit.<sup>6</sup> Not to be shorted \$25 on a two calliope deal, one of the Ringlings wrote McCrackin on January 18 and indicated the price for either calliope should be \$575, an arrangement McCrackin assented to in his January 21 response.

The Ringing calliope was expressed to Baraboo on February 3, 1913, with the Barnum unit shipped to Madison Square Garden in time for the show's March 22 opening date. Prior to their dispatch, a grand concert was held at the Pneumatic plant "to demonstrate the superiority of the Mammoth Air Calliopes," as the account of the event was worded in the *Billboard*. Professor Holden, a piano player from Bloomfield, entertained the audience with selections of classical music, while Miss Freda Kunze of Newark provided ragtime melodies. Present in the audience were E.S. "Ned" Brill, the bandleader of the Barnum & Bailey show, and Matt Meeker, a cornetist and pianist who had been selected to play the calliope in the big show band.

The first circus use of an air calliope came during the March 22, 1913 matinee of the Barnum show at Madison Square Garden. The *Billboard* review of the event recorded the addition of the instrument to Brill's band, noting "If there is one instrument in the world that is indigenous to the show business it is the calliope. There is circus in its every note."<sup>8</sup> Ori cited Brill about the same time, his ad in the March 22 *Billboard* noting that Brill felt a brass band was incomplete without a calliope. The Ringling instrument debuted in Chicago on April 5, 1913, and thus did a long association between the circus and the air calliope have its origin.

Following the placement of his calliopes on the Barnum & Bailey and Ringling shows, Ori encountered little difficulty in selling additional instruments to the other big shows. Sells Floto, Hagenbeck-Wallace, John Robinson, Sparks, Barnes, and others all procured Pneumatic calliopes during the mid 1910's, making Joe Ori a welcome visitor to many circus lots. The Pneumatics proved to be reliable calliopes, serving thirty to forty years in circus use before expiring from abuse or being allowed to retire to a quarters barn or preservation.

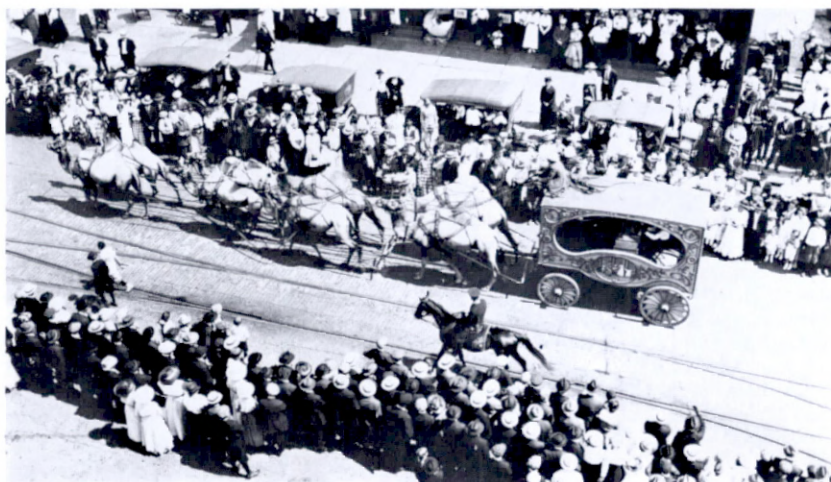
The Ringlings intended to use the new calliopes both in the big show



**The Gollmar Bros. bought a Tangley air calliope to place in their wagon which was built about 1915. The Tangley had an oak housing, with all of the whistles mounted at the same level. Author's Collection.**

band and in the parade. To facilitate this, they arranged for the construction of a new wagon by their cousins, the Moellers, who operated a wagon building concern in the Ringling's winterquarters town of Baraboo, Wisconsin. The wagon's design recalled the full roof steam calliope wagons built by Henry Ohlsen in the early 1890's. It featured a large kidney shaped opening on the sides, with a carved oval below the center of the hole. The sides and back door were covered with carvings typical of those the Moellers used to decorate the cages and dens built for the Ringlings. The air calliope was placed crosswise, in the center of the wagon, with the

**The Ringling air calliope parades in Hornell, New York, probably 1918. While the wagon usually was pulled by a ten pony hitch, eight camels had the job in this photo. Pfening Archives.**



player facing the rear, the calliope's blower and gas engine being located behind the player in the front half of the wagon. Later the calliope was turned around, so that the player faced towards the front of the wagon, and wasn't seated beside the gas engine.

A new wagon was also constructed to house and carry the Barnum & Bailey calliope, but the identity of its builder has not been confirmed. Its overall execution, however, suggests it too was a product of the Moeller firm. Simpler in style than the Ringling vehicle, the ornamentation on the Barnum & Bailey wagon consisted primarily of scrolled carvings. Photographs of the wagon on Barnum & Bailey are rare, in contrast to the rather common views of the Ringling wagon.

The adoption of the air calliope as a parade feature didn't always meet with enthusiasm. When the Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows played Atlanta on October 9, 1916, the air calliope's presence in the early part of the parade caused many Georgians to think the parade had come to a pre-





**Merle Evans' band on Ringling-Barnum used the 49 whistle Ori calliope throughout the 1920's and 1930's and into the 1940's. Photo taken in early 1920's. Pfenning Archives.**

mature end. According to the reporter present, "everybody who heard it coming said 'that's all I reckon,' and started to go home, for everybody knows that the steam piano is the very last thing in a circus parade." The scribe noted it was the Pneumatic Calliope Co. instrument which had caused the confusion. Everyone was elated when the parade didn't end but continued, and were happy when "The regular calliope came along at long last, where it belonged. It was a real steam piano, with black smoke rolling out of the stove pipe and the whistles moaning and screeching and everybody was pleased. There was considerable criticism of the way the circus people tried to fool everybody by running in two calliopes on them."<sup>7</sup>

The desire to avoid shifting the air calliope from the parade wagon to the bandstand combined with an apparent desire for an instrument more suitable for use in the band, led to the later construction of a 49 whistle Pneumatic calliope for the Barnum & Bailey show. The exact date of its origin is not known as the contract documents have apparently been destroyed. Four decades after it was built, Ori's nephew, Peter George Ori, stated it was made the winter of 1912-1913, but it is believed his memory was confused by the construction of the two 43 whistle instruments that winter. The surviving Ringling-Ori correspondence of early 1913 makes no mention of it, and reading the letters one senses none of the Ringling personnel were familiar with the Pneumatic calliope at that time. These circumstances would indicate the big calliope was built for the 1914 or 1915 show, as its first documented appearance is in a pan view of the show's band published in the September 11, 1915 issue of *Billboard*. In a 1938 interview, Joseph Ori himself indicated it had been built in 1914. Looking like an enlarged 43 whistle unit, it is identifiable by the larger number of whistles and the presence of three oval ac-

cess ports below the whistles. The standard 43 whistle Pneumatic have only two ports in this location.

Bandleader Brill was the apparent pusher for the new instrument, Ori's nephew recalling years later that Brill visited the Pneumatic plant many times during its construction. Except for one known instance, the 49 whistle Pneumatic was used exclusively in the big show band, being disassembled and placed in a trunk after the show, and transported in the baggage wagon which carried the other band props. The calliope was used continuously through 1941 when it was replaced by a Hammond organ as part of the North brothers effort to modernize the show. It was then used on the side show front in the 1950's, after which it was relegated to storage at the Sarasota winterquarters where it was rescued from oblivion by noted restorer Thomas A. White, who donated the historic instrument to the Circus World Museum in 1974. It can be heard there daily during the summer season as part of the circus performances.

Ned Brill left the Barnum & Bailey show following the 1918 tour and the Ringlings secured Merle Evans as bandleader of the new combined shows band in 1919. Holding the bandleader's job through 1969, Evans was in daily contact with the big Ori calliope for 22 years and has provided information concerning its use in the band. Evans indicates that in 1919 the calliope was played in the key of C, which was changed to B flat in 1920. This allowed the player to directly use the solo cornet part of the music without having to transpose it. The player did not "fake" any music, following the solo cornet parts and thus giving keyboard playing cornet players the in-

side track for the calliope position.<sup>8</sup>

The success and popularity of the Pneumatic calliope on the 1913 Ringling show inspired Charles Ringling to write his brother Al concerning the possibility of adding a second unit in 1914. Charles advised "I would also add another small air calliope on as small a wagon as possible, which would be used in the side show, and in street parade, and as they are playing all the time they add life to the parade and it would be a sure money getter in the side show. If we wanted to add two more and cut out the steam calliope it might be a good thing. It would save buying coal, hauling water, getting up steam, and a six horse trip for the baggage stock. They are always in tune and sound much better than the old style calliope."<sup>9</sup> The second air calliope would also permit the show to dispense with the ticket sellers band which, from Ringling's description, was a sad affair. Similar thought of dispensing with the steamers had occurred to other showmen following the advent of a successful air calliope. This opportunity to replace the steamer was offered by Norman Baker, a Muscatine, Iowa, builder of calliopes who had just entered the business.

Baker was Ori's only serious competition in the air calliope business before 1920. His firm, the Tangley Manufacturing Company, produced a calliope which mimicked those of Ori, having 43 whistles ranging from F to B and an adjustable siren whistle. However, it featured a simpler arrangement, having all the whistles mounted at one level, instead of in Ori's stepped, cascading arrangement. Tangley's first customers are unknown, but it does not appear that the legend specifying the first buyer as carnival proprietor James Patterson is accurate. The question of which calliope, Ori's or Baker's, was better is a moot point, but the mass produced Tangley calliope would far outsell the handmade Pneumatic calliope. Prior to 1920, the prolific Tangleys would outsell the Pneumatics everywhere except in the circus field, where Ori's machines were the rule rather than the exception.

Waiting to investigate the steamer replacement for one year, on August 17, 1914 one of the Ringlings finally wrote the Tangley firm regarding the air calliopes they built, apparently inquiring about the largest and most powerful instrument they could produce.<sup>10</sup> Baker proposed building a super compressed air calliope with two keyboards and 50 whistles, ranging in size from several inches to four feet long, tuned for operation at 10 p.s.i.<sup>11</sup> The complete calliope with a blower and gas engine was priced at \$2175, almost four times the price the Ringlings had paid for steam and air



calliopes in 1913. Tangle's sales pitch was that the air calliope would "enable you to do away with your large steam machine and its smoke and fuel troubles."<sup>12</sup> In a follow up letter Baker advised that the Sells-Floto show was contemplating buying an even bigger air calliope from Tangle, a statement made to arouse concern in the Ringling camp that one of their biggest competitors might have a machine superior to that owned by the Ringlings.<sup>13</sup> It was Al Ringling, the recipient of Charles' original idea, who advised Tangle they would continue using their steam calliope and "defer the building of the big machine for another season."<sup>14</sup>

Sells Floto also passed up the big Tangle machine and later that same year Charles Sparks threatened to replace his steamer with an air calliope, only to relent and purchase a bigger steam calliope than the one he owned previously.<sup>15</sup> To the best of our knowledge, only one air calliope replaced a steam calliope until well into the 1920's, the big steamers continuing to hold down the final position in the circus parade until the wagon style parade itself passed from the scene. There can be no doubt, however, that the invention of the air calliope limited the sales of new steam calliopes to all but their traditional roles in the railroad circus, on excursion steamboats and aboard floating theatres. The air machine would be the instrument specified to satisfy the parade needs of the motorized circuses of the 1920's and 1930's.

To complete the story of the first air calliope wagons, when the Ringling and Barnum & Bailey circuses were combined into one show following the 1918 season, three air calliopes became available for the 1919 tour. Aware of their entertainment value, the Ringlings used all three in both 1919 and 1920, the big 49 whistle Pneumatic in the band and the two 43 whistle Pneumatics and their wagons in the parade. After the 1920 tour and the abandonment of the parade for 1921, the two 43 whistle machines and their wagons were relegated to storage at the show's Bridgeport winterquarters.

One of the late Bill Woodcock's many recollections concerning the transfer of circus assets involved the sale of an air calliope from the Bridgeport winterquarters to the Nat Reiss carnival in the 1920's. Woodcock's source placed it at 53 whistles, a size made only by E.A. Harrington and the National Calliope Company. There is no confirmation either builder ever placed an instrument on the Ringling-Barnum show, and it is likely the instrument was actually one of the 43 whistle Ori calliopes of 1913, probably the one which originally resided in the Ringling wagon. This hypothesis is



The Ringling air calliope wagon body temporarily housed the 49 whistle Barnum & Bailey air calliope when the Gimbel Brothers New York store borrowed both pieces for a special Christmas promotion sometime in the 1920s. The big 49 whistle Ori can be identified by the three ovals below the lowest set of whistles. A. Bruce Tracy Collection.

based upon the presence of the 49 whistle Barnum & Bailey Pneumatic in the Ringling calliope wagon during a special promotion for a post 1918 Christmas sale at the Gimbel Brothers' New York store. For the Gimbels appearance the Ringling wagon body was removed from its original wagon gears and placed on a straight-bed truck. The width of the 49 whistle Ori precluded placing it in the normal crosswise manner, and thus it was placed in a rather awkward longitudinal

position in the rear of the body.<sup>16</sup> If the original 43 whistle instrument was still available, it is logical that it would have been in the wagon, and not the oversize 49 whistle calliope. Unfortunately the dates of both the Reiss purchase and the Gimbels promotion are unknown at the present time.

The Ringling air calliope wagon appears intact in a photograph taken after the February 2, 1924 fire which destroyed one of the large barns at the Bridgeport winterquarters, negating the possibility that it was destroyed in that conflagration. Since the 49 whistle Ori calliope remained a Ringling-Barnum fixture until years later, the chance that the Ringling wagon went permanently to Gimbels is rather remote. It also was not included in the large group of wagons sold to George Christy in 1925 which marked the beginning of the end of the Bridgeport quarters. Except for its possible inclusion in the sale to the Reiss carnival, nothing has been found to indicate the ultimate disposition of the 1913 Ringling air calliope wagon.

The old Barnum and Bailey 49 whistle Pneumatic machine was a show business veteran by the time it appeared in front of the Ringling-Barnum side show in 1954. Pfening Archives.







Another note provided by Bill Woodcock pins down the final days of the 1913 Barnum & Bailey air calliope wagon. It too survived the 1924 Bridgeport fire and was on the train which departed from Bridgeport for Sarasota on May 3, 1927 carrying usable equipment still remaining at the Connecticut site. At an undetermined date, one of the Ringling-Barnum assistant boss animal men cut off the top of the wagon and converted it into a manure wagon for use at the Sarasota quarters, much to the chagrin of show manager Carl Hathaway who had intended to sell it. The disposition of the instrument it once carried remains uncertain.

Joseph Ori continued to build calliopes through the 1920's but the onset of the depression wiped out much of the need for new instruments, and he could no longer support himself on the repair business. Seeking other employment, Ori continued to repair calliopes as a sideline until

In 1939 an Ori calliope paraded for the last time on Cole Bros. Circus. The sky-board from this wagon is now owned by Fred Pfening Jr. Pfening Archives.

his death in the early 1940's. Today only a few Pneumatic calliopes survive, but their quality bears testimony to the skill and care of the man who made them.

A note of thanks is due Joseph T. Bradbury, Merle Evans and Robert L. Parkinson of the Circus World Museum for their contributions. Special credit is due Fred D. Pfening III for supplying the Ringling correspondence in his collection, and to Mrs. Betty O. Hagen for information concerning Joseph Ori.

1. Q. David Bowers, *Encyclopedia of Automatic Musical Instruments* (Vestal, N.Y.: Vestal Press, 1972) pp. 838-844 is the best discussion of air calliopes currently available, but the material given is necessarily limited by the scope of Bowers' volume.

2. Letter from Joseph E. Dupont to Ringling Bros. dated January 9, 1913. All of the Ori-Ringling correspondence is in the collection of Fred D. Pfening III, who has kindly allowed the author to present it here for the first time.

3. Letter from Ringling Brothers to Samuel McCrackin dated January 11, 1913.

4. Letter from Samuel McCrackin to Al Ringling dated January 16, 1913.

5. Letter from Joseph E. Dupont to Ringling Brothers dated January 16, 1913.

6. *Billboard*, March 29, 1913, p. 6.

7. Dudley Glass, "Calliope Near Parade Front Just One of Circus Surprises; Another One In Usual Place," *The Atlanta Georgian*, October 9, 1916, courtesy Robert Brisendine.

8. Letters from Merle Evans to the author dated May 19 and June 9, 1983.

9. Letter from Charles Ringling to Al Ringling dated August 26, 1913. Fred D. Pfening III collection.

10. The Ringling letter of August 17, 1914 is lost. The inquiry is discernable from the Tanglely response dated August 18, 1914. The Baker-Ringling correspondence is in the Fred D. Pfening III collection.

11. Letter from N. Baker, Tanglely Manufacturing Company to Mr. Ringling dated October 4, 1914.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Letter from N. Baker to Mr. Ringling dated October 19, 1914.

14. Letter from Al Ringling to Tanglely Manufacturing Company dated November 11, 1914.

15. *Billboard*, December 12, 1914, p. 43.

16. A. Bruce Tracy Collection.

## The 1984 Circus Historical Society Convention

The Circus Historical Society held its annual convention on September 1-4 at the Quaker Square Hilton in Akron, Ohio. The hotel provided excellent accommodations, and used the event for a number of circus related promotions and displays. Among these were an air calliope, and model of a Ringling-Barnum Mack truck in the lobby, and a model circus in a connecting shopping mall.

The big show began on Thursday night with a number of fine circus movies. A film of the 1944 Ringling-Barnum train and back yard was one highlight of the evening. Another was the renewal of old friendships and the making of new ones as many members continued the opening night festivities into the wee hours in the bar and other locations throughout the hotel.

Friday was history day, and conventioners listened to papers and viewed films from morning until late at night. After welcoming remarks by president Dick Flint, John Polacsek presented a slide show on an exhibit he directed which commemorated the 75th anniversary of Shrine circuses in Detroit. Fred Pfening III followed with a paper on the American circus during the depression of the 1930s. The opening session ended with a panel discussion of performing arts troupes, and non-profit circuses which included Judith Daykin, Tom Parkinson, Dick Flint, and Alan B. Slifka, chairman of the board of the Big Apple Circus. Slifka explained the unique corporate structure of the big Apple show, pointing out that receipts make up only 75% of expenses with the rest coming from grants and contributions.

A luncheon followed during which Dick Flint presided over an informal business meeting. He explained that the organization was in better financial condition than in past years with steady real growth in membership. One major factor in achieving this healthy bottom line was the result of fifty-one members who voluntarily paid \$25 dues, and twelve who paid \$50. This generated approximately \$900 extra for the society which will be used for more pages and more color in the *Bandwagon*. Flint also acknowledged the fine job Ed and Jean Jones had done in keeping the organization's books, and Fred Pfening, Jr. for his work as editor of *Bandwagon*. Consideration was given to both Baraboo, Wisconsin, and Peru, Indiana as sites for the 1984 convention, and Somers, New York as the



site for 1985. Baraboo and Peru will both be celebrating 100 years of their circus heritage in 1984, and Somers will be commemorating the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Zoological Institute agreement in 1985. An announcement of the 1984 site will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Bandwagon*.

Fred Dahlinger led off the afternoon session with a paper and slides on the origin of the circus air calliope. He was followed by John Polacsek whose paper was entitled "Northern Ohio Show Print Houses." Dahlinger returned to the podium, and gave a presentation on "Highlights in the History of the Barnum Show Train, 1872-1897," which included a number of remarkable photos of the 1880 Cooper and Bailey train.

The final paper of the afternoon was "Buffalo Bill's Wild West: 100 Years Later," by Sarah Blackstone who had recently completed her Ph.D. thesis on that show. She indicated the ways in which the Bill Show performance has shaped current popular preceptions of the old west. Two papers had to be rescheduled for Sunday as the day's presentations had been so engrossing that they far exceeded their allotted time.

After dinner more films were viewed, including the classic "For Gold and Glory" produced by Barry Young, and featuring still photos of the 1902 Ringling show juxtaposed with shots of the Milwaukee parade with narration by his father, the late Baker Young, long time CHS member.

Following the films came the first annual CHS Circsiana Auction. Dick Flint acted as auctioneer, assisted by John Polacsek and Fred Pfening III. This was no rummage sale as the items bid on included an 1898 Barnum and Bailey one-sheet poster, a P.T. Barnum autograph, trade cards featuring Jumbo from the 1880s, Cole

Bros. lithographs, and a number of other very desirable pieces, all donated by members. While bidding was frenetic, many bargains were had, and everybody had a whale of a time. The auction raised the astounding sum of \$873 for the organization, far exceeding expectations. Afterwards, the weary and broke members retired—either to bed or to the bar—after experiencing the most intense one day seminar in circus history ever.

The next day was more leisurely as the only scheduled events were the Circus Fans Association's Sells Bros. Ohio State Top meeting in the early afternoon, and the evening performance of the Carson and Barnes Circus. Many members spent the day on the Carson and Barnes lot in nearby Tallmadge, catching the set-up, and the afternoon performances. Others attended the Sells Bros. meeting where Judge Dale Riker discussed the circus and the law. Still others made the drive to the Stark County Fair in nearby Canton where the George Haneford Circus was playing as a free show.

The CHS attended the evening Carson and Barnes performance en masse. The show was stronger than ever and entranced the audience with its huge menagerie, wonderful spec, terrific elephant numbers, and many other exciting acts. And yes, Stuart Thayer made the elephant ride, much to the delight of his wife and the many photographers who knew a historic moment when they saw one, and recorded the event for posterity.

The final day began with films.

Attending the 1983 CHS convention were the presidents of the three circus organizations, left to right, Earl Schmid, Circus Model Builders; Dick Flint; Circus Historial Society and Hardy O'Neal, Circus Fans Association of America. Photo taken at the Carson & Barnes Circus.

Among others, the Christy and Robins Bros. parades of the 1920s were shown, and Bob Parkinson screened a marvelous film from the Circus World Museum of the 1937 Cole Bros. Circus. Some members chose to forego the presentations and went back to either the Carson and Barnes or Haneford lots.

In the afternoon, Stuart Thayer gave a paper on Oscar Stone, a self taught bareback rider, and partner in the great Rockwell and Stone Circus of the 1840s. Dick Flint followed with a talk on James A. Bailey's ethnological congress, an outgrowth of a similar show at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Fred Pfening III then discussed public collections of circus material. A lively exchange followed about collecting and library policies. Many of the papers given at the convention will be published in this and subsequent issues of the *Bandwagon*.

The convention concluded that evening with the banquet. Mr. and Mrs. D.R. Miller, Ted Bowman, and a number of other people from the Carson and Barnes Circus were guests. Tom Parkinson entertained the audience of approximately 125 with memories of his years as circus editor of the *Billboard* in the 1950s. His fascinating talk included a detailed account of the events that led to the closing of the Ringling show in 1956, and, on a happier note, the big Cristiani date in Chicago in 1958. His speech was well received—how could it have been otherwise—and was a fitting finale to another excellent convention.

As with any event of this kind, many people contributed to its success. The most credit goes to Dick Flint and Mary Len Runser who laid the ground work with the hotel and the circus. John Polacsek, Fred Pfening III, Alan Slifka, Dick Flint, John Still, and the Carson and Barnes Circus donated the material in the registration kits and pass outs, and Polacsek posted the arrows from the hotel to the Carson and Barnes lot. Cam Cridlebaugh, Ron Richards, Gordon Brown, Fred Dahlinger, Fred Pfening Jr., John Polacsek, and Fred Pfening III contributed circsiana for the auction. Lew Warren loaned his superb scale model Mack truck. Fred Dahlinger's fine old Tangley air calliope was a great hit, especially when Martha "Kratz" Polacsek, and Boyka "Crazy Ray" Thayer played it. Rich Deptula, John Polacsek, and the Carson and Barnes Circus assisted the hotel in the circus displays, and Bob Parkinson of the Circus World Museum, Walter Heist, Fred Pfening Jr., George Bingaman, Bill Rhodes, and Hazel Young provided films. Thanks, too, to all those who gave papers, and finally to the Carson and Barnes Circus for their assistance in the planning of the convention. Fred D. Pfening III





# The Fred Buchanan Railroad Circuses 1923-31

## Robbins Bros. Circus

### Part IX - The 1931 Season

by Joseph T. Bradbury

#### Foreword:

Twenty-five years ago I had an article on the 1931 Robbins Bros. Circus which was published in the November-December 1958 White Tops. At the time I was researching that article the late Bill Woodcock Sr. was still living and furnished invaluable information on the show. He had been employed at the Hall Farm in Lancaster, Mo. in the early 1930's where the Robbins equipment had been parked following the 1931 season. As a result he was able to provide a wealth of data especially on the physical equipment, even such things as the color scheme for the rail cars and wagons, the number and type of cages, etc. Likewise, he was familiar with the number, names, and history of each elephant in the Robbins herd and was knowledgeable of the rest of the lead stock as well as menagerie animals on the show that season. With Woodcock's help we have far more information on the 1931 season than for any of the others. Some new material has come in during these past 25 years, all of which will be used in this article but the biggest find has been the many new photos which have turned up in recent years. We have considerably more photos for 1931 than for any of the other seasons; in fact, so many that a special photo supplement will be run sometime after this article is printed. At that time additional information on some of the previous seasons already covered will also be presented.

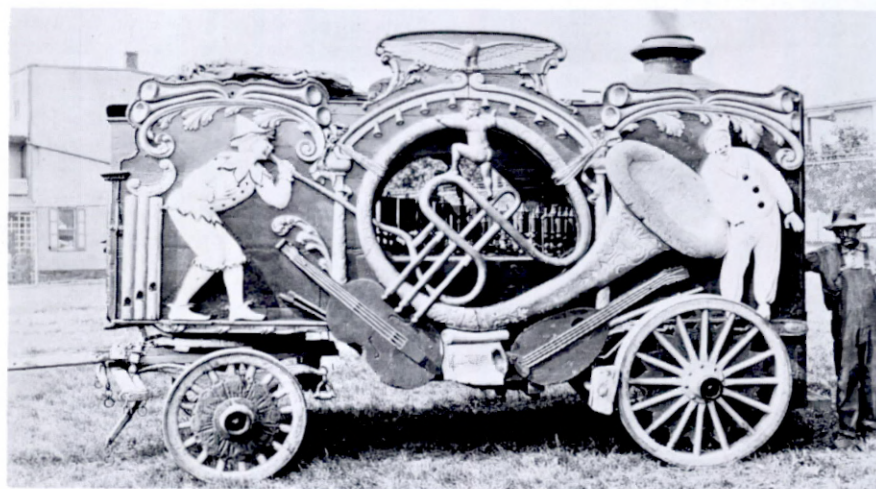
As noted in the last installment, tradition has long held that Fred

Buchanan was able to make it back to quarters in 1930 only through funds furnished by William P. Hall. The Robbins show went into quarters at Hall's place in Lancaster, Mo. rather than returning to Buchanan's farm near Granger, Iowa. A report came out that the name of the show in 1931 would be changed to World Bros., a title Buchanan used back in 1923.

January 1, 1931 saw the birth of the second full year of the great depression. During the early months of the year the trade publications carried their usual amount of winterquarter activities for most of the shows but a complete silence fell on Robbins Bros. Circus at the Hall Farm. Virtually nothing was printed in the *Billboard* concerning the show during the first three months of the year.

Buchanan was in desperate need of funds so he sold his prized hippo, Miss Iowa, to the Swope Park Zoo in Kansas City, Mo. for a reported \$4,000. With the hippo gone the huge cage which had been built for the animal at the Granger quarters in early 1929 was left in Lancaster during the 1931 season.

William P. Hall did put up the money so the show could go on the road and took a mortgage on practically all of the rolling stock, animals, and physical equipment. We shall later learn that Hall had to foreclose on this mortgage in February 1932 which would indicate that in all probability he had provided Buchanan with the funds a year earlier. Details of what animals, equipment, etc. were covered by the



Chattanooga  
Tuesday, Aug. 18

PRICE REDUCED

First Time in 12 Years!

Children, 25c

Circus Grounds Warner Park

**LARGEST CIRCUS-WORLD**  
**GIVING STREET PARADE**

TWO  
PERFORMANCES  
DAILY  
2:15 & 8:15 PM

**ROBBINS  
BROS.**

**BIG  
4 RING WILD ANIMAL  
CIRCUS**

**BIG  
BINGO**

WEIGHTS FOR  
MOST YOUNG  
MEN OF  
5 ELEPHANTS

**1000 PEOPLE 1000**

**300 WILD ANIMALS**  
**100 TRAINED HORSES**

**40 CLOWNS**

**MISS  
IOWA**

THE  
WORLD'S MOST  
FAMOUS  
HIPPOPOTAMUS

**Buck Owens**  
Hollywood  
FILM STAR  
IN PERSON

**PONCA BILL'S WILD WEST**

**STUPENDOUS PAGEANT**  
**MOTHER GOOSE**  
WITH  
**SANTA CLAUS**  
FREE AUTO SHOW ON GROUNDS

Tickets On Sale at  
**ELKINS DRUG STORE**  
8th and Cherry—Circus Day

Newspaper ad for Robbins Bros. stand at Chattanooga, Tenn., Aug. 18, 1931. Note the show continued to advertise Miss Iowa the hippo although she had been sold before the season began. Pfening Archives.

Robbins Bros. steam calliope on the lot, season of 1931. Pfening Archives.



mortgage will come later in this article.

None of this of course came out in any of the trade publications so the circus world was completely in the dark as to Buchanan's plans for 1931. A single short notation in the January 31, 1931 *Billboard* said that Fred Buchanan, owner, and John Schiller, manager, of the Robbins Bros. Circus spent several days in Kansas City, Missouri in conference with various department heads. Finally the April 4, 1931 *Billboard* carried this report: "BUCHANAN'S SHOW WILL BE ON ROAD. Reports have been going the rounds that Fred Buchanan's Robbins Bros. Circus would not be on the road this season. To get a confirmation or denial on these rumors the *Billboard* wired Buchanan at Lancaster, Mo. and he sent the following dispatch.

'Show goes out just the same as usual. Opens April 27.'

The same issue carried this advertisement: "ROBBINS BROS. CIRCUS. Wants Feature Acts for the Big Show. Cowboys, Cowgirls, Cossacks for the Wild West. Clowns, High School Riders, Race Riders. Address at once. Bert Rickman, Equestrian Director, Lancaster, Mo."

With this article and advertisement coming in early April it was official that Robbins Bros. would be on the road. Nothing further was said about the possible use of the World Bros. title or the reason for that report back in late 1930. Possibly, there may have been some sort of problem for continued use of the Robbins name since Milt Robbins was no longer connected with Buchanan. It will be later learned that Sam B. Dill used the Robbins title for his motorized show in mid-May claiming he had made arrangements with the heirs of the late Frank A. Robbins for such use. In any event for most of the 1931 season there would be two separate circuses both using the Robbins name.

The train which carried Buchanan's show on the road in 1931 had 15 cars, five fewer than the 20 cars which came into the Hall Farm the previous fall. The advertising car was not carried in 1931, instead the advance moved on five trucks and/or automobiles. Likewise Buchanan's private car "Rover" did not go out. Woodcock said that some of the old timers at Hall's claimed the Rover car was once used by President Theodore Roosevelt but he didn't know whether or not there was any truth to that. It was a handsome car for its day with an open end observation platform which was the custom of all such private cars.

It may be recalled that we have no official breakdown as to number and type of car for the 20 car Robbins train at the end of the 1930 season, only that it moved with one in advance and 19 cars back. However, an educated



Robbins Bros. train ready to unload in the rain, Sunday, June 28, 1931 at Westfield, Mass. Show date was Monday, June 29 at Holyoke, Mass. Joe Rettinger Collection.

guess would have the train consisting of one advance, four stocks, 9 flats, and 6 coaches. The 1931 train had 3 stocks, 7 flats, and 5 coaches, for a total of 15. This means that the 5 cars dropped were the advance, 1 stock, 2 flats, and 1 coach (the Rover car). Woodcock said the color scheme for 1931 was as follows: Stocks and flats were painted orange with red lettering. Coaches were dark Pullman green and had a red letter belt in the space between edge of roof and top of the windows. The title placed on this belt was in yellow. On each end of the coaches below the windows was a F.B. (Fred Buchanan) monogram. Five of the flat cars were all steel Mt. Vernon built. Another flat was a steel car of a different manufacture which Buchanan had used since World Bros. in 1923. Photos do not show the full 7 flats in 1931. Possibly one was an older wooden car. Although some observers have said that many of the Robbins baggage wagons and tableau were in somewhat of a shoddy condition, indicating little maintenance or paint had been applied during the winter, the rail cars, by contrast, had been given a new coat of paint and presented a very attractive appearance.

Some changes were made in the ele-

Eight horse team with big top pole wagon as Robbins Bros. unloads in the rain at Westfield, Mass., Sunday, June 28, 1931. Pfening Archives.



phant herd which had contained the same 10 animals for the past few seasons. Columbia, Big Katie, Big Jennie, Blanche, Vera, and Little Babe which had been on the road in 1930 were retained; however, Ena, Trilby, Margaret, and Tony, were left at the Hall Farm. Hall provided three more elephants from those he owned to go with the other six, giving a total of 9 in the 1931 herd, one less than the previous year.

The three new ones coming from Hall were as follows (this information coming from Chang Reynolds) (1) VIRGINIA. This is the same elephant that was later named Burma. She had been on the John Robinson Circus, featured as a wild-born baby, in the early 1920's. Later she was with Sells-Floto Circus and went to the Hall Farm at the end of the 1928 season. She was with many shows while based at the farm; later on Atterbury, and achieved fame on Mills Bros. She came to Mills in 1942. (2) SADIE. Was purchased by Wm. P. Hall from Louis Ruhe in 1926. During the winter of 1926-27 she was sold with Elsie to Criley Orton. She and Elsie were with Orton through 1930. At the end of the 1930 season Hall repossessed the two elephants because Orton did not pay. There were both on Robbins Bros. for the 1931 season. In 1933 the Hall heirs sold both Sadie and Elsie to the Russell Bros. Circus. Sadie was on the Russell show until 1941 when she was killed in a truck wreck during the season. (3) ELSIE. Same history as Sadie through 1945; then she was purchased by Kelly-Miller Circus for 1946. Stayed with that show through 1955; then went to Hagen Bros. Cir-





Robbins Bros. elephants enroute to lot at Marion, Ind., May 16, 1931. Photo by George Piercy (Gordon M. Potter Collection in Pfening Archives).

cus. Died on Hagen Bros. on 9 June 1959 at Williamsport, Pa. Elsie is famous for a runaway from the Russell show at Staunton, Va., in August 1939. She was gone for 33 and a half hours. Lots of photos and articles in the papers at that time.

The 1931 roster of the elephant herd thus read, Columbia, Big Katie, Big Jennie, Blanche, Vera, Little Babe, Virginia, Sadie and Elsie.

On the 7 flat cars loaded a Mack truck, another large truck, a small Fordson tractor, and about 30 wagons. Woodcock said the baggage wagons were painted red with under gear in yellow or orange with black stripe. The title was in yellow or white.

The menagerie contained seven cages. Most were the medium length, two den variety, with a few being somewhat shorter. One observer inventoried the caged animals as follows: monkeys, 1 puma, 2 leopards, 1 jaguar, 1 zebra, 1 hyena, 1 red fox, elk, black and brown bears, and 2 lions. The zebra den, which was short, had plain wheels and a highly carved skyboard. Two longer dens had carved skyboards also with the carvings in gold leaf. One den carrying an elk had wire mesh instead of bars, while another had a winged creature carved on its skyboard. Clowns rode this cage in the parade. Those dens not having carved skyboards contained beautifully painted boards done in gold. The bear cage, which had twin compartments, had a very colorful skyboard with gold leaf painted designs and a center RBC monogram.

Lead stock in addition to the elephants consisted of 6 camels, 12 ponies, 20 head of ring stock, and 46 head of draft stock. All of these animals plus the 9 elephants caused the three stock cars to be well loaded. It will be noted that the above list of lead stock was according to one observer. Others come up with somewhat different counts.

Buchanan, a great believer in the value of the daily street parade, continued with this popular feature in 1931. Although the march wasn't as

elaborate as when he had a 30 car show it was still completely adequate for that size circus. The following tableau wagons were carried: Russia, plus those from the Spellman set, Belgium, United States, Great Britain, and Africa (often called India or Hippo). One reviewer said the France wagon was carried but omitted Africa; however, many express doubt that the France wagon was on the show in 1931. It appears in no photos although there are numerous shots of all of the others, including those of Africa. In all probability the France wagon remained in the Lancaster quarters. Another reason, other than the absence of photos, which tends to support this, is that after Adkins and Terrell acquired these wagons of the Spellman set in the mid-30's, the France wagon was used on their Cole Bros. in 1937 but none of the others made their appearance until 1938 which may have meant that since France did not tour in 1931 it was in better condition to tour than the others. The former Barnum & Bailey Clown and Horn steam calliope was used as well as the former Yankee Robinson air calliope in the parade.

The 1931 street parade looked like this, based on photos and eyewitness accounts. The No. 1 band rode the Belgium tableau which was pulled by a Mack truck. The United States tableau, which also served as the reserve seat ticket wagon, carried the No. 2 band and was pulled by a beautiful hitch of 6 black horses. The sideshow band rode the Great Britain tableau which was pulled by a hitch of 6 dapple grays. A fourth band, a cowboy outfit, joined later in the season and rode one of the other tabs. Costumed performers rode the Russia and Africa tabs. The clown contingent was on top of one of the cages and a Scots Highlander with bagpipe rode the bear cage. All performers in costume made the parade and those not mounted were on the top of the various cages and tableau wagons. The air calliope was pulled by a 6 pony hitch, and the cages by 2 and 4 horse teams. All teams had plumed harness. The wagons had attractive banners, and drivers and helpers were uniformed and helmeted. There were quite a few mounted riders including flag bear-



Camels enroute to lot following unloading of Robbins Bros. train at Marion, Ind., May 16, 1931. Note the show's three stock cars at far left. Photo by George Piercy (Gordon M. Potter Collection in Pfening Archives).

ers, Indians, cowboys and cowgirls. The truck pulling the steam calliope brought up the rear and had a huge sign hung on its sides reading, "Robbins Bros. Circus, Admission Prices Reduced. Adults 50c, Children 25c, Pay No More." At the keyboard of the steamer was "Crazy Ray" Choisser.

One report that appeared in the *Billboard* when the show was in North Carolina said there was only one piece of motorized equipment in the parade, that being the truck which pulled the steam calliope. If that was true then it means at times a hitch pulled the No. 1 bandwagon (Belgium), however all photos picture the Mack truck pulling this wagon.

The Robbins Bros. opening date was set for May 4 at Kirksville, Mo. but even as the time for the season's kickoff neared still there was little or nothing in the trade publications concerning the show. The April 19, 1931 *Billboard* had a few short notices which said that Manny Gunn would be 24 hour man with Robbins for the coming season and that Joe Holland, sailmaker, was now enroute to the show's quarters in Lancaster.

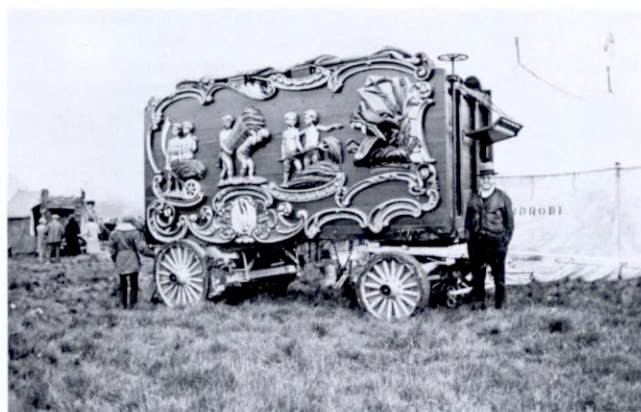
The great business depression was again a factor with which showmen would have to contend with in 1931, the greatest in fact. The depression was gradual as factories continued to slow down or shut down completely, unemployment rose, the money supply dwindled, and prices, especially those for farm products, got lower and lower. This trend continued until so called rock bottom was reached in July 1932, after which a gradual trend upward began. Theoretically 1931 would be worse overall than 1930, but strangely enough that wasn't true for circus business. The season of 1931 was better for most shows than 1930 because the owners knew what to expect and made the necessary retrenchment to ride out the bad times. In 1930 virtually every show got hit hard. They were still geared up for the good business of 1929 which didn't materialize, and



instead some of the smallest takes since the post war recession of 1921 hit them. The mood of showmen was entirely different from that of the previous winter and early spring. There was no optimism and most took the attitude they would cut expenses as low as possible, go out, and hope for the best. The king of all, John Ringling, cut his circus empire from 6 road shows to 5, keeping John Robinson in its Peru, Indiana quarters. He also knocked off 5 cars from Sells-Floto pulling it down to a total of 35, and an additional 5 from Sparks, reducing that show to 15. In all John Ringling had 35 cars less of circus on the road in 1931 than the previous season. The Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West Show which had closed early in 1930 was able to reorganize and go out in 1931 with its train cut to 21 cars. G.W. Christy whose 20 car Christy Bros. also had a rough time and early closing in 1930 still had his equipment intact at his South Houston, Texas quarters, and for a number of weeks he was like Buchanan, the show world speculating on whether or not he would go out. Finally some weeks into the normal start of the season Christy announced he wouldn't try it. The April 18, 1931 *Billboard* announced that E.H. Jones would not have his 3 car, gilly type, Cole & Rogers Circus on the road in 1931. It was the first time Jones was out of action in 25 years. He sold his stock, elephants, and camels to W.L. Scott of Manchester, N.H. who had a park and zoo, and stored his show paraphernalia.

The 1931 circus season was now at hand. Railroad shows (flat car type) going out included Ringling-Barnum, 90 cars; Sells-Floto, 35 cars; Hagenbeck-Wallace, 30 cars; Al G. Barnes, 30 cars; Sparks, 15 cars (the first five shows on the list were owned by John Ringling), Robbins Bros., 15 cars; and

**Africa Tableau (often called India or Hippo) on the Robbins Bros. lot, Marion, Ind., May 16, 1931. Long time CHS member George Piercy on right. Gordon M. Potter Collection in Pfening Archives.**



Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West, 21 cars.

Motorized shows were Downie Bros., Mighty Haag, St. Leon Bros., Seils-Sterling, Hunt's, Wheeler & Sautelle, Schell Bros., Lewis Bros., Barnett Bros., Gentry Bros. (owned by Sam Dill), Russell Bros., Walter L. Main, Sam Dock, Orton Bros., Henry Bros., Olinger Bros., Fisher Bros., Knight Bros., Snyder Bros., and Escalante Bros.

A few weeks into the season saw the appearance of Henry B. Gentry's new Gentry Bros. Dog & Pony Show, a medium size motorized outfit. Then Sam B. Dill relinquished his use of the Gentry title and renamed his motorized show, Frank A. Robbins Circus.

Rail circuses which paraded in 1931 were Robbins Bros. and Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West Show. On the larger motorized shows the street parade was still the rule rather than the exception in contrast to the railers, and most of these overland shows continued in 1931 with the march.

Robbins Bros. opened its season as scheduled at Kirksville, Mo. on May 3 then continued in that state with dates at Columbia and St. Charles before moving on into Illinois.

There were no reviews of the performance, nor rosters of the staff or bosses, in any of the trade publications immediately following the Robbins opener which had long been the standard custom not only for this show but all of them. It was several weeks before any Robbins news appeared.

There are two significant facts about the Robbins Bros. 1931 route. For the first season since Buchanan had a show he would play no dates in his home state of Iowa. No doubt Iowa was avoided so as not to risk possible attachment for unpaid bills for the previous season. In time the bank would foreclose and take over Buchanan's house, farm, and quarters at Granger. Another interesting aspect of the 1931 route is that after promising to go east for several seasons the show finally did just that, with a thorough tour of New York state, New England, and down the Atlantic sea-

board. Much of the 1931 tour was completely new for a Buchanan operated show.

Former trouper, long time circus fan, and CHS member Kenny Hull caught Robbins Bros. at the second stand of the 1931 season, May 5, at Columbia, Missouri. Hull writes:

"The last time I caught Robbins Bros. was in the early spring of 1931 at Columbia, Mo. I can be certain of the year as it was the last year I attended classes at the University of Missouri there in Columbia. I cut classes to visit the show. It was a cold wet day as many early spring days are in that area. The show was quite late in getting in from Kirksville, Mo. I recall that Columbia was the second city played in the season and on the tear down the night before most of the drivers had become drunk and had a difficult time in getting the wagons back to the train. The show moved into Columbia on the Wabash railroad and set up on a slanting sort of lot out west of town on old Highway 40. The team and harness all appeared to be in fine condition but many wagons could have used new paint. The big top was not a new tent but did have one or two new middle pieces that stood out very bold like against all the other old canvas. Due to the lack of funds I did not attend the performance but do know the show did not get much of a play that afternoon." Kenny wasn't sure of the size of the big top but felt it might have been as large as a 140. Later reports have the top somewhat smaller. Still other reports mention acquisition of new canvas, so possibly a new and smaller top was put into use later in the season.

The first Illinois stand came at Alton, May 7, which was followed by Lincoln and Champaign. The show then moved on a Sunday run into Indiana for dates at Lafayette, Anderson, Marion, and Muncie, then continuing on eastward as Robbins entered

**Robbins Bros. lion cage on the lot at Marion, Ind., May 16, 1931. Photo by George Piercy (Gordon M. Potter Collection in Pfening Archives).**







Ohio for a two week stay. Stands in Ohio included Greenville, Middletown, Piqua, Lima, Findlay, Sandusky, Marion, Mansfield, Mt. Vernon, Wooster, Massillon, Ravenna, Warren, and Barberton.

The first news of any kind from the show came in the May 23, 1931 *Billboard*. The article said that Robbins Bros. spent most of May in Ohio. Massillon had been contracted for May 26 and Barberton for Decoration Day, May 30. Bookings had been confined to the smaller industrial centers while Sells-Floto had been billed in the large cities of the state.

During the entire 1931 season Robbins Bros. route did not appear in the *Billboard* for even a single date. Many of the news items in the magazine dealt only with reports of certain dates the show had booked. It was noted several times that opposition shows had a difficult time in learning the Robbins route since railroad contracts didn't list an advance car moving days, or weeks, ahead of the main train. The Robbins advance trucks and autos could move undetected and the show's coming appearance in a town wasn't known by opposition shows until its billing paper went up. In this respect it had the same advantage of a motorized show in shielding its route when it so desired.

Even though the *Billboard* was silent on news from Robbins Bros. during its first month of the new season, its pages were filled with any and every report that could be found which told of business conditions the various shows were encountering. That was what was foremost in the mind of every showman. Surprisingly, the early reports for the most part were good. There had been a capacity crowd at

**Robbins Bros. midway at Hornell, N.Y., June 5, 1931. Note main sideshow at left, pit show at right. Photo by W.H. Pennoyer (Joe Bradbury Collection).**

the opening of the Walter L. Main Circus at Ashtabula, Ohio on April 25, despite rain. Owners Jimmy Heron and William (Honest Bill) Newton Jr. were pleased and optimistic. The May 2, 1931 *Billboard* which had given the Walter L. Main story also said that Al G. Barnes' business had been exceptionally good in California. A week later the *Billboard* noted that Hagenbeck-Wallace in its first season under new manager, Jess Adkins, had opened its season with an enlarged menagerie at Connersville, Indiana, May 2, to very good business. Also, George Engesser's Schell Bros. had a fine take in Oregon. A letter from an observer, which was printed in the "Under the Marquee" section, said he had seen Sam B. Dill's Gentry Bros. three times, Schell Bros., and Al G. Barnes, and all three shows were doing above average business. Another report came from a person who said he caught Al G. Barnes at Gilroy, California, and quoted manager S.L. Cronin that so far Barnes business had been 40 percent greater than in 1930. The poor guy must have gone overboard for the very next week Cronin said he had made no such statement. He said that business had been about the same as last year's average with the large cities running better, but the take in the small towns a lot worse.

The anxiously awaited news from the biggies came in mid-May. Ring-

**Robbins Bros. menagerie top on the lot at Hornell, N.Y., June 5, 1931. Photo by W.H. Pennoyer (Joe Bradbury Collection).**



ling-Barnum's run at Madison Square Garden had been profitable and Sells-Floto's business at the Chicago Coliseum was ahead of 1930.

It seemed to be true with practically every show in 1931, the early season take was perhaps the best of the year. Business began to drop as the summer months came on, with some shows feeling the effects of the dip more than others.

A final note of general circus interest came in the May 23, 1931 *Billboard* which said that the Gentry Bros. title was now back in the hands of its originator, Henry B. Gentry, who placed it on his show scheduled to open with a dog and pony format on June 1. At the same time Sam B. Dill, who had used the Gentry title all of 1930 and so far in 1931, had arranged with the heirs of the late Frank A. Robbins to use that title effective May 16 at Paris, Mo. Later in the season two Robbins titled shows went after one another in the south. At long last news from Robbins Bros. appeared in the *Billboard*. The May 30, 1931 issue carried the following:

**"ROBBINS BROS. CIRCUS REPORTED DOING WELL.** F. Robert Saul, circus press agent, who recently visited Robbins Bros. Circus, reports that owner Fred Buchanan has a good show and that it has been doing some business.

"It is really a 25 car show loaded on 15, with everything bright and attractive. Many flags and pennants of All Nations, as the street pageant is called, flutter in the breeze from tops of city of tents, while Jimmie Shropshire's double decker new 18-banner line is an attractive, inviting advertisement for the kid show. Shropshire has 16 stages inside his new kid show top. Acts include Cuba Mack, Seminole Indian chief, sword swallower, juggler, fire eater, who also does impalemeant act with his wife, Princess Voilla; 11 Hawaiians, dancers, singers and instrumentalists; five people Scotch act, Alpine act, and Prof. Payne's Georgia Colored Minstrels.

"On front door is Fred Buchanan, who is surrounded by his efficient staff of John Schiller, manager; Les G. Minger, legal adjuster, Ray Swann, auditor, and L. Ray (Crazy Ray) Choiser, in charge of pass gate, who doubles on his 'steam piano.' Charles (Candy) Meyers is big show ticket seller.

"A five-pole menagerie has 15 cages of all kinds of wild animals, [note, this does not mean 15 separate cage wagons, but individual cage compartments], 9 elephants, and 13 camels. Big top is very attractive with new high-back grandstand facing center of three rings and stages. On backside is other section of reserves and also stage where Equestrian Director Bert Rickman's spec, Little Miss Tuffett in



Fairyland, is put on. Minnie Atzen is prima donna, and Harold Hall has a fine baritone voice. Chester Sherman also is in cast.

"Joe Hodgini, his wife, Etta; Howard Bryant and Betty Hodgini have a good comedy riding act. Hellmuth and Hattie Pallenberg present their wonderful performing bears. Frank Wasen presents 11 Arabs in acrobatic feats. One of the Oyami troupe of Japs walks up and down a flight of steps on his head. Their barrel and table juggling is most daring. Swinging ladder and iron-jaw numbers and races are on program. Clown alley is headed by Kenneth R. Waite.

"Prof. P.H. (Red) Payne, big show band leader, offers an excellent concert before big show starts O.A. (Red) Gilson, bandmaster under Buchanan banner for last 10 seasons, is confined to a Des Moines hospital with a serious case of pneumonia. Crisis is past, so his friends with show look for speedy recovery.

"Roster of Payne's band: Leon Darrow, Charles Hancock, Guy L. Warren, trumpets; H.F. Heilberg, John Lincoln, clarinets; W.F. Keyser, baritone; Bob Morley, Gabe Floto, Fred Cooke, trombones; Glen P. Johnson, sousaphone; Craig Ferguson and Wilbur Weirick, drums. Payne has one of the best bands of its size on road.

"Lawrence (Fat) Arnold is superintendent of inside tickets; Jay Smith, Mose Becker, Bill West and Crazy Ray Choisser are on reserved tickets; Mrs. Dora Choisser is ticket taker on grand stand; Jack Crippen, uptown ticket sales and ticket taker on backside reserves; Paul Barton handles the train and 'Chuck' is boss hostler."

The stand at which F. Robert Saul caught the show and sent in his interesting report was not identified, but probably was in Ohio. A number of other shorter reports telling of the route through that state were printed in the trade publications. One notice

**Robbins Bros. elephants in street parade at Hornell, N.Y., June 5, 1931. Photo by W.H. Pennoyer (Joe Bradbury Collection).**



said that when Robbins played Mansfield, Ohio, May 23, the local newspaper, *The Journal*, gave front page mention to the sideshow acts, relating among other things that stage artists had replaced freaks. The account said the show was doing good business in spite of cool weather. Another item in the *Billboard* said that Walter B. Fox caught Robbins Bros. at Barberton and Massillon, Ohio and reported a smooth running and well balanced performance. Owner Fred Buchanan and staff were unusually attentive to a host of visitors, one of whom was R.M. Harvey of the 101 Ranch Wild West.

The June 13, 1931 *Billboard*, in an article titled "Robbins Bros. Business Good in Buckeye State," said that the show was experiencing the first real circus weather since opening early last month, and playing to excellent patronage in industrial cities in Ohio. At Massillon the show played to a three-fourths filled tent in the afternoon and capacity at night. Fred Buchanan informed the *Billboard's* representative that business had been satisfactory thus far despite inclement weather of earlier in the month and that not a stand had been missed. He said new wardrobe was expected soon, that drivers in parade would be outfitted in new uniforms, and that the principals in the spec cast would have new costumes. The Hassan troupe of Arabs were out of the big show program, having left last week. This act was to be replaced soon, Buchanan said, by a large Arab troupe. Mary Rickman, wife of equestrian director Bert Rickman, had been added to Joe Hodgini's riding act and made her debut in Massillon. The show is to be routed east. Best seats this season were \$1.00 top, including reserved chairs, or 75 cents for the star backs.

The show went into Pennsylvania for two stands, Sharon, June 1, and Meadville, the following day. Next came an eleven stand tour of New York state and during the tour Robbins Bros. came up with some of its best business in years, certainly the biggest take of the entire 1931 sea-

son. The initial date was at Jamestown, June 3, and was followed by Salamanca, Hornell, Elmira, Binghamton, Auburn, Ithaca, Courtland, Oneida, Herkimer, and Schenectady.

The June 20, 1931 *Billboard* had an interesting piece which said that George H. Barlow III, well known circus fan, of Binghamton, New York caught Robbins Bros. when it played his home town on June 8 and was entertained by Robert Buchanan. Barlow reported that although equipment was only a little better than half as extensive as last season, the performance was a commendable one. Joe Hodgini's troupe of riders was excellent. Band was one of the best with any circus, and it was this unit in particular that helped make it the show it is. Buck Owens appeared several times during the performance as well as in concert. Show was transported on 15 cars with 5 trucks in advance. Big top was a 110 ft. round with one 50 and two 40 ft. middles. Menagerie was a 60 with four 30's. All canvas was new. Parade wagons, some of them having been bought from the old Barnum show, were in excellent condition and made for a colorful parade, smaller, but favorably comparing with those of old time big shows.

In the same *Billboard*, Fred T. Slater, an oldtimer, wrote that Robbins Bros. at Binghamton, N.Y. showed to good crowds at both performances despite bad weather and heavy opposition billing of Sells-Floto booked in the city for June 22. The Sells-Floto Car No. 1 arrived from Patterson, N.J. and did heavy billing in the city and suburbs. It was the first visit of a Robbins titled show in Binghamton in 20 years. The report concluded that James Shropshire's side show drew crowds all day and evening.

Circus agents somehow must have picked up the word that this section of New York state was faring pretty well in spite of the depression, and

**Russia Tableau pulled by four horses follows the elephants in Robbins Bros. street parade at Hornell, N.Y., June 5, 1931. Photo by W.H. Pennoyer (Joe Bradbury Collection).**







Air calliope with six pony hitch on the Robbins Bros. lot, season of 1931. Pfening Archives.

shows were all over the place when Robbins was there. Robbins Bros. played Auburn, N.Y. on June 9 and Downie Bros. came in the very next day but the city still gave both shows overwhelming business, a real rarity, truly freakish, in the midst of the great depression. The June 20, 1931 *Billboard* told the story of this most unusual event in an article headed, "AUBURN, N.Y. SETS NEW RECORD FOR CIRCUS CROWDS. City of 40,000 gives Robbins Bros. and Downie Bros. good matinee houses and capacity night business on successive days—opposition clean, no extra newspaper space." The story read as follows:

"AUBURN, N.Y., June 13—This city, with approximately 40,000 population, set a new record Wednesday and gave the lie to pessimists and hard-times croakers. It also now enjoys the unique distinction of being the only small city in the Union that can successfully support two circuses on successive days and give each capacity business. Downie Bros. made this city first and had it posted, when along came billposters for Robbins Bros. and plastered the city for appearance here one day ahead of Downie Bros. Neither show weakened and hence on Tuesday came Robbins Bros. and in the rain had a good matinee and set them on the straw at night.

"First section of Downie Bros. was on the same lot before Robbins Show was loaded and employee of dining department of Downie Bros. saw the night performance.

"Downie Show arrived Wednesday in the rain also, but it cleared up before the parade. matinee was near capacity and at night circus officials stated the show did the biggest business of the season. By 8 o'clock every reserved seat had been sold and all admission seats were full. At 8:15 o'clock when show started, crowd was sitting on straw and cage covers and every bit of space to the ringbanks was occupied. The wagon was closed before circus started and thousands were turned

away despite efforts of city officials and police to have management give two performances. Condition of lot, soft after the rain, caused Manager Charles Sparks to decide not to give a second performance.

"The *Auburn Citizen*, in commenting on the business, said that it was proof positive that hard times had not hit this city and that another circus could have done business the next day. Auburn was certainly circus hungry. Robbins also packed them in Ithaca next day.

"The Auburn opposition was clean and neither show use extra newspaper space. The Robbins ad said, 'The only railroad circus coming this year,' and Downie Bros. used the slogan, 'The circus you have known for 50 years.' Visits were exchanged and both circus owners appeared to be satisfied over the outcome of the first clash between the East and the West."

While Robbins was in Auburn, Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys joined the show as a concert feature. It was planned that Gray would broadcast frequently, thus giving the show additional advertising. Gray's cowboy band also became a feature of the street parade.

Leaving Auburn the show moved the next day to Ithaca, N.Y. and the June 27, 1931 *Billboard* stated that Robbins paid its first visit to that city on June 10 and was also the first circus to use the fairgrounds lot. The grounds had recently been sold to private parties and the land had been made available for circus purposes. The article noted that Robbins was traveling on 15 cars with the advance by truck. Pit show and refreshment stands also were traveling by truck. The show was closely packed, carried nine bulls, six camels, seven cages, as well as parade equipment, including two calliopes. School was dismissed for parade. The performance was very good and kept on a high level of cleanliness and word-of-mouth advertising usually produced capacity houses at night. Manager Fred Buchanan stated that business had been far above expectations, and that he intended to



Robbins Bros. bear cage on the lot, season of 1931. Pfening Archives.

soon enlarge the seating capacity of the big top.

On June 15 the show had its banner date of the season when it did tremendous business in Schenectady, N.Y. The June 27, 1931 *Billboard* told the story of the record date with an article headlined, "ROBBINS BROS. HANGS UP RECORD IN SCHENECTADY, N.Y. Gives two afternoon and two evening performances in one day to capacity—enormous business attributed to first parade in decade and admission prices of 25–50¢.

"SCHENECTADY, N.Y., June 20—Robbins Bros. Railroad Circus (Fred Buchanan, proprietor), hung up a record in this city Monday. For first time in history of Schenectady and, so far as known, in history of circus world, four unscheduled performances were given. An extra matinee in afternoon and a second show at night being necessary to take care of overflow. Whatever unemployment there may be here was all written to credit side of circus books. Highest wave of prosperity that ever swept opulence hither could have carried no more folk to circus grounds than Monday motored, trolied or hoofed there from all points of the compass.

"Veteran circus men of Robbins outfit were astounded at vast dimensions of hordes which four times stormed entrances to big top. They declared that never before had they seen popular outpouring paralleled.

"Big top seats about 5,000. At afternoon show seats were quickly filled and every available foot of space was soon filled by 'standees,' men, women and children sitting on ground in front of tiers of seats. It had rained early in afternoon and clean straw was strewn on grounds for these overflow patrons.

"And still a vast horde of men, women and children clamored for tickets and admission to tent. In order to take care of enormous crowd, management announced that a second performance would be given immediately after concert and Wild West show. This operation was repeated at the



night show, second night performance not being over until after midnight.

"Thus Robbins Bros. has unique distinction of presenting a continuous performance from 2 p.m. until 12 o'clock midnight.

"City's reaction to the circus—smaller than others playing Schenectady every year—can only be classed a phenomenon of show business. Low prices of admission, 25 and 50 cents, had something to do with it, but biggest contributing factor undoubtedly was the street parade, the first in a decade, which gave thousands of young folk their first view of a real, old, honest-to-goodness 'street pageant' of sort that set their fathers to rustling for price of admission. Anyhow, something did it, for within compass of 10 hours four complete shows were given to capacity business."

Schenectady was the final stand in New York state then the show went into Massachusetts with the first date coming at Greenfield on June 16. This was followed by Gardner and Fitchburg. The *Billboard* reported that Robbins Bros. would be the first circus in Fitchburg that season, and the show was to be at the Summer street grounds, located in Lunenburg, just over the Fitchburg line. It was noted this would be the first visit Robbins Bros. ever made to Fitchburg and vicinity.

The *Billboard* later reported that the show played to packed houses at both Greenfield and Gardner and that in Fitchburg, June 18, again there were full houses at the two performances. At Fitchburg the Feuch Brothers, acrobats, joined the show.

On June 19 the show moved into New Hampshire for a single stand at Nashua which was marked by two accidents to performers taking place during the afternoon performance. Buck Owens was thrown from his horse and knocked out as he attempted the feat of climbing under the animal when the horse was going around the hippodrome track. After being attended by a physician he was able to resume his act. Senorita Galicia, aerialist, had a narrow escape from death when the pulley holding her up gave way, and only her presence of mind saved her from a bad fall. Feeling the pulley give, she grasped a rope and swung clear of a center pole. John T. Benson was on the lot in Nashua and was entertained by Buchanan.

After Nashua the show returned immediately to play Marlboro, Waltham, and Taunton. A single date in Rhode Island came at Pawtucket on June 24, then the show moved into Connecticut for Norwich, Middletown and Bristol. On June 29 Robbins went back to Massachusetts for a stand at Holyoke, then returned to Connecticut at New Britain on the final day of June. Ad-

ditional dates in the state were at Ansonia, Danbury, Torrington, Meriden, and New London.

Wes Herwig, CHS member, caught Robbins Bros. at New Britain, Conn., his home town at the time, June 30, 1931. He writes as follows:

"The only year I ever saw a Buchanan show was in 1931 and I was not impressed by it. The parade was shoddy and everything had a rundown look about it. The show did good business in my home town of New Britain, Conn. and I always understood that business in most New England stands was not too bad. I remember the show carried a large pit show in addition to the side show. The pit show featured a 'gorilla,' although I suspect it was a big ape, instead. My notes on the day said they had 5 camels, also that they didn't get much paper up."

Possibly one reason that Herwig didn't see much Robbins paper posted that stand was a shortage of billposters on the advance crew. The following advertisement appeared in the July 11, 1931 *Billboard*: "WANTED. For Advance, ROBBINS BROS. CIRCUS. Billposters that can lithograph. Bannermen. Must drive gear-shift car. W.J. Erickson, Reading, Pa."

New London, July 6, was the final Connecticut stand of the season and then the show went back into Massachusetts a final time playing Brockton, Lynn, and Lowell. A last visit to New Hampshire came at Manchester, July 10, and after performances at Keene the next day the New England tour came to a close.

There were only a few reports in the trade publications telling of the Robbins initial visit to New England. One short note in the July 25, 1931 *Billboard* said that Frank Littlefield attended the Robbins performance at Taunton and Lynn, Mass. and was well pleased with the program. He ad-

**United States bandwagon ready for morning street parade on the Robbins Bros. lot, season of 1931. Pfening Archives.**



vised that James Shropshire had a nicely arranged kid show.

It was now mid July and two and a half months of the season had gone by. Surprisingly, business had been pretty good, overall far better than the year before. The eastern territory which Buchanan had said he would play for so long had paid off. The good business was doubly amazing because in spite of far more opposition from other shows than in recent years the take still had been way above what was expected. Competition was everywhere and at most stands there already had been one or more circuses in or others to come shortly thereafter. There was an interesting note in the July 11, 1931 *Billboard* which gave an example of some of the competition the show faced that season. Fred T. Slater, an oldtimer, wrote that Sells-Floto had two full houses at Binghamton, N.Y. on June 22, despite the fact two other circuses were there — St. Leon Bros. the week of May 29 and Robbins Bros. June 8.

The show left Keene, N.H. on a Sunday run to Albany, N.Y. where performances were given on Monday, July 13. The following day the show played Kingston, N.Y., and the *Billboard* said it drew two big houses. The show was not permitted to parade on account of newly paved streets. The notice said that the performances pleased the crowds as did the concert band under leadership of P.H. (Red) Payne.

Other New York stands were at Newburgh and Middletown, after which the show went southward into Pennsylvania with first date coming at Scranton, July 17. Other Keystone state dates were at Wilkes-Barre, Pottsville, Reading, Lancaster, Lebanon, York, Lewiston, and Altoona. Not much news of this part of the route appeared in the trade publications but the *Billboard* said the show came in for some nation-wide notices when Arthur Brisbane mentioned Robbins Bros. in his daily column, used on hundreds of newspapers' front pages.

While Robbins Bros. was at Lewis-



ton, Pa. on July 25 the sad news was sent out to the circus world that Al G. Barnes had died. Although Barnes had been retired from show business since selling his 30 car circus in early January 1929 to the American Circus Corporation he was still recognized as one of the giants of the business.

Altoona, July 27, was the final Pennsylvania stand and the show then continued ever southward into Maryland for Cumberland, Hagerstown, and Frederick, and on the final day of the month was at Alexandria, Va., where it was the first circus of the season for that city. The show used the Washington Street lot in Alexandria and the parade was given. Five additional stands in the Old Dominion State were scheduled, Charlottesville, Richmond, Newport News, Norfolk and Petersburg.

While in Virginia to bill the various stands three members of the Robbins advance were injured in later July when their automobile turned over on the Suffolk highway near Petersburg as a tire blew out. Clyde Parks was the most seriously injured of three men taken to the Petersburg hospital. Two other members of the advance riding in the car were not injured. Fortunately after about a week or so in the hospital it was reported that all three men would be able to leave soon and rejoin the Robbins advance.

The August 8, 1931 *Billboard* said that the show had a capacity night house in Alexandria, Va. following a rather light matinee. The street parade attracted much attention. The show as a whole was highly complimented by those in attendance, and excellence and cleanliness of the program was commented upon. Marshall King, prominent CFA member, entertained a group of visitors at dinner on the evening preceeding the performance.

While Robbins was at Newport News, Va. on August 4 not far up the

**Robbins Bros. setting up on the lot at Pawtucket, R.I., June 24, 1931. In foreground are the five center poles for the menagerie tent. Photo by John Cutler (Joe Bradbury Collection).**



road at Washington, D.C. the first major circus casualty of the season took place. The Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West played a two day stand in Washington, August 3-4, and following performances the second day the show folded. It had experienced bad business the season before, closing early, and had been financially pinched ever since it went out in 1931. Unfortunately for the show, business continued to be very slow, much on the order of 1930, and when it reached Washington the end was at hand. It was broke and could go no more. Funds were acquired to ship the train and equipment back to its Marland, Oklahoma quarters, but the show was finished, another casualty of the great depression. On the very next day, August 5, St. Leon Bros. Circus closed suddenly at Williamsport, Pa. It likewise had experienced bad business. Many shows which had boasted of good takes during the early part of 1931 were now singing the blues. Both Hagenbeck-Wallace and Sells-Floto had seen business dip in recent weeks and Al G. Barnes had plain poor business in Missouri.

Ora Parks who had been press representative since 1925 for the now defunct 101 Ranch Wild West Show joined the publicity department of Robbins Bros. at Richmond, Va., on August 3.

Robbins next went into North Carolina to play Wilson, Raleigh, Durham, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, Charlotte, and Asheville. An odd opposition date occurred at Greensboro, N.C. when Sam B. Dill's show, called "Robbins 3 Ring Circus" was scheduled to play August 7 and Buchanan's Robbins Bros. scheduled for August 11. Both shows billed the town heavily and Buchanan threatened to take legal action to force Dill to change his title or at least the phraseology that it was not the "original" Robbins Bros. Dill claimed he had legal right from the heirs of the late Frank A. Robbins who had operated a railroad circus through 1915 to use the Robbins name. Buchanan, of course, had used the Robbins Bros. title since 1924. No action was ever taken against Dill however.

The August 8, 1931 *Billboard* told of the Buchanan-Dill confrontation with a short article headed "TWO ROB-BINS IN SAME CITY. Robbins Bros. Circus and Robbins Circus, 3 days apart at Greensboro." The story said that much confusion resulted from simultaneous billing of the motorized Robbins Circus and the Fred Buchanan Robbins Bros. Circus. The two Robbins shows soon went their separate ways and nothing further was mentioned in the trade publications about the matter.

The August 22, 1931 *Billboard* carried an interesting write-up of Buchanan's first visit to North Carolina which was headed "ROBBINS BROS. SHOW DOES FINE IN RALEIGH. Harry Baugh, vice-president of CSSCA caught the show at Raleigh on August 8 and reports big crowds at both performances. The performance gave best of satisfaction and Raleigh newspapers were loud in their praise of it. Entire program is a worthy one. Scoring heavily were Pallenberg's Bears, Jap Troupe, Joe Hodgini's riding act, Buck Owens' Wild West Troupe and elephants. Both specs were pleasing and went over big. Sideshow, under management of veteran James Shropshire, had good business all day. A noticeable and pleasing feature of circus is its parade, in which no motorized equipment is used at all except on the calliope, all cages and wagons being horse drawn. While on the lot Baugh enjoyed meeting Sherwood Upchurch and 'Buck' Jones, two warm friends of the circus, and who have done more in interest of favorable circus legislation than any men in the state. Fred Buchanan and his staff vied with one another in making the day a mighty pleasant one." (Author's note: If this report that only one truck was used in the parade and that to pull the steam calliope is correct, then the No. 1 bandwagon must have been pulled by horses. As in-

**Robbins Bros. unloading at Pawtucket, R.I., June 24, 1931. In foreground are Cage No. 46 and tarp-covered steam calliope. Note flat cars and coaches on the tracks in rear. Photo by John Cutler (Joe Bradbury Collection).**





licated before all photos we have picture a truck pulling the No. 1 bandwagon).

After Robbins' stand in Ashville, August 14, the show went into Tennessee at Morristown, then played Knoxville, Chattanooga, Murfreesboro, and Nashville. There were only a few reports in the trade publications on this part of the route. It will be noted that the show was playing larger cities than ordinarily for a 15 car show. No doubt this was done primarily because the show was into this part of the south several weeks earlier than usual, and Buchanan was able to go into these cities ahead of Ringling-Barnum and the other large railers that played this territory in the fall.

The show next left Nashville for seven stands in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama with all travel on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad. We have a most interesting document, the railroad billing Order No. A-11251 of the General Freight Office, Louisville, Kentucky dated August 13, 1931. It is the standard document used by all railroads listing various rates and rental charges which accrue if the train remains parked after a certain period of time. The entire document will not be reproduced but certain items of historical value will be. The train to be moved consists of 7 flat cars, 3 stock cars, and 5 coaches, a total of 15. Each movement will begin "about midnight" and begins Nashville, Tennessee, August 20 and ends in Decatur, Alabama, Aug. 28. The seven one day stands are consecutive except that the show will not play on Sunday, August 23. The charges for the individual moves to be paid to the station agent before the movement begins are as follows:

To the Agent at Nashville, Tenn.	\$444.00
To the Agent at Bowling Green, Ky.	331.50
To the Agent at Glasgow, Ky.	475.00
To the Agent at Owensboro, Ky.	475.00
To the Agent at Hopkinsville, Ky.	331.50
To the Agent at Clarksville, Tenn.	412.50
To the Agent at Columbia, Tenn.	444.00
To the Agent at Decatur, Ala.	331.50

The final payment to the agent in Decatur, Alabama was to move the train as far as Cullman, Alabama, then it would be interchanged to another railroad which would move it on to Tuscaloosa, Alabama where performances were scheduled on August 29.

A Sunday run next took the show to Birmingham with show date set for Monday, August 31. The *Billboard* said that Robbins Bros. was the first circus to break into Alabama territory



Robbins Bros. Mack truck pulling the No. 1 bandwagon, the Belgium Tableau, in the street parade at Pawtucket, R.I., June 24, 1931. Photo by John Cutler (Joe Bradbury Collection).

that year. It noted the show was traveling about three to four weeks ahead of usual circus season in Birmingham, which is the latter part of September or first of October. The same issue also said that Robbins Bros. in Owensboro, Ky., August 24, had about 75 percent capacity at the matinee and a full house at night. The parade and performance was very pleasing. The Original Gentry Bros. Show played Owensboro on August 1 and also had good attendance. The article reminded that this was Robbins first visit to Owensboro which was the home town of Manager Zack Terrell of Sells-Floto. While in the town Fred Buchanan had quite a talk with Terrell's mother and uncle.

The September 1, 1931 *Billboard* had an interesting article headed "DEPRESSION NOT EVIDENT. Robbins Bros. receipts satisfactory in South—two night shows at Birmingham." The piece said that the depression didn't seem to be felt in the South by Robbins Bros. The show was now entering its third week where cotton was the chief money producer. It was felt that the low price of cotton, about four cents a pound, would leave little money to turn loose on circuses. Buchanan felt, however, that there was money in the South. The circus had good business at Knoxville, Tennessee. At Chattanooga, next day, it rained, but that didn't keep the folks away. Almost a week of rain through Tennessee hurt business with the show slightly, but not greatly noticeable, Buchanan said. Robbins came into Birmingham and proceeded to do very big business. At the evening performance demand for tickets was so great that the tent was unable to hold them and the show was forced to put on two performances that night. Evidently Buchanan expected to continue to tour as long as business held up like this and the weather was with him.

While in Tuscaloosa, Alabama the

tents were waterproofed. During the Sunday layover in Birmingham the show folks had a good time. A party was staged at the Alabama Theater by its manager, Vernon Reaver, who was treasurer for the show several years.

Ora O. Parks, who handled press for the Robbins advance, closed in Birmingham. F. Robert Saul, long time press man with Robbins, who had not been on the show earlier during the 1931 season, joined about this time and remained through the final stand.

After Birmingham the show played two more stands in Alabama, Gadsden, and Anniston, and on September 3 moved into Georgia at Rome. Three more dates in the state followed, Macon (4), Columbus (5), and after a Sunday off, Albany (7).

Manny Gunn, contracting agent, made the arrangements for the show's appearance in Macon, Georgia, and while in town renewed acquaintances with many whom he knew during the several winters he spent there while connected with Sun Bros. and Sparks circuses. The motorized Downie Bros. Circus, owned by Charles Sparks, was currently using the old quarters in Central City Park, coming in following the 1930 season after the Ringling-owned Sparks Railroad Circus switched its quarters from Macon to Sarasota, Florida.

The *Billboard* said that Sparks Circus was scheduled to follow Robbins Bros. into Macon. The article noted that when Robbins Bros. exhibited in Macon on September 4 the show was visited by a number of former troupers and circus fans. The matinee business was light but business at the night performance was good. Sparks opposition paper went up two days before the Robbins date and both shows used special ads in newspapers. Sparks played Macon on September 24. Some of the visitors to Robbins in Macon were E.L. Mallard, circus fan and southern representative of Downie Bros. Circus; Dixie Green, in charge of the Sparks opposition brigade; Charles Underwood, former trouper; Leroy Williams, formerly of Sparks, and Paul Conaway, Macon newspaperman, who was press





**Robbins Bros. steam calliope pulled by a truck brings up the rear of the street parade at Pawtucket, R.I., June 24, 1931. Photo by John Cutler (Joe Bradbury Collection).**

agent on Sparks Circus last season.

The show returned to Alabama at Montgomery, September 9, played Selma, the next day, then moved on into Florida for a single stand in Pensacola on September 11. On September 12 the show came back into Alabama and played Mobile that day, which was on a Saturday. The show was scheduled to move the following day on a Sunday run to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, but that never came off. Instead the show closed suddenly, without notice, and the train was routed back to the Hall quarters in Lancaster, Missouri. Soon after leaving Mobile came the infamous "red lighting" of personnel from the moving train which resulted in death to one man and injury to others.

This event was told in the September 26, 1931 *Billboard*:

"ROBBINS BROS. HAS SUDDEN CLOSING AT MOBILE, ALA. Show cancels dates and makes home run to Lancaster, Mo.—end came as surprise—workingmen reported ejected from train, but show official denies.

"CINCINNATI, Sept. 19—Robbins Bros Circus closed unannounced Saturday night, September 12, at Mobile, Ala. It is said that with exception of a few executives, no one with show knew anything about sudden closing until they were en route to Lancaster, Mo. winter quarters, nor did the advance until endeavored to get in touch with outfit. Closing was a surprise, inasmuch as show is understood to have had a good season. Outfit was routed to play in Louisiana and Arkansas the following two weeks. many complaints were received by the *Billboard* in St. Louis regarding workingmen being ejected from train, man reported killed, etc. In order to get the show management's side of the case, the *Billboard* sent the following telegram to Fred Buchanan, owner Robbins Bros. Circus, Lancaster, Mo; 'Complaint from various sources reaching us about "red-lighting" workingmen after unannounced closing at Mobile. One man reported killed and two elderly men seriously injured. Further complained performers and certain others not permitted to get off train en route Lancaster. Please wire your side of story.'

"No reply was received from Bucha-

nan but the following telegram came from John Schiller, connected with the Robbins Bros. organization: 'All reports untrue. Mr Buchanan on way Louisiana.'

"The *Billboard's* St. Louis office informs that approximately 35 attaches of show are stranded in Lancaster and that some of the members called on that office for aid, both in person and on long-distance telephone.

"It is understood that performers and other people connected with show had three weeks and two days salary due them. Pay-off was made Thursday morning at Lancaster, Mo. but only a few, it is said, received entire amount.

"In connection with claims of circus workers alleging ejection from show train, etc. the following appeared in *Mobile (Ala.) Register* under date of September 14:

'Complaints were made to the office of Sheriff William H. Holcombe yesterday by a large group of laborers attached to Robbins Bros. Circus, which played here Saturday, that they were ejected from the outbound show train between Whistler and Oak Grove as it departed for Missouri early yesterday morning over the Mobile & Ohio Railroad.

'The circus train pulled out from Mobile about 4 o'clock a.m. The first report about the alleged ejection of the men from the train reached the sheriff's office about two hours later by telephone from Prichard.

'Later the men appeared at the sheriff's office and reiterated the complaint, Sheriff Holcombe, who estimated there were 50 or more men in the group protesting the alleged treatment, said W.H. Knox, a special agent of the Mobile & Ohio, left yesterday for Meridian, Miss. to investigate the reported ejection of the show workmen from the train.

'The men were sent to a warehouse building in the river front district for shelter last night, according to information from the county jail.

'In statements at the county jail, members of the group alleged they

were forced from the train after having been summoned into a baggage car and paid \$1.00 apiece, it was stated at the sheriff's office. After this procedure, according to the version of the incident related by the men at the sheriff's office, they were told to pass into another car, from which they claimed to have been ejected.'

"The following appeared in the *St. Louis (Mo.) Post-Dispatch*:

'GLENWOOD JUNCTION, Mo., Sept. 16—A number of workmen and performers, including musicians, were stranded here yesterday when Robbins Bros. Circus arrived from Mobile, Ala. without having paid the employees three weeks wages. Workmen were offered two weeks pay in settlement and performers one week's pay. A few workmen accepted.

'Attorneys are attaching the circus equipment valued at \$25,000 to \$50,000 on behalf of the employees, who represent a number of nationalities.'

More information concerning the sudden Robbins closing came in the October 3, 1931 *Billboard* in an article headed "GRAND JURY IS TO INVESTIGATE ALLEGED EJECTION OF CIRCUS MEN. Mobile, Ala., Sept. 28—October grand jury of the Circuit Court will investigate the alleged ejection of laborers, many of them sustaining injuries from the train of Robbins Bros. Circus (now in winter quarters at Lancaster, Mo.) as it was passing along the Mobile & Ohio Railroad between Whistler and Oak Grove, 14 miles from here, early Sunday morning, September 13, it was announced by County Solicitor Bart B. Chamberlain.

"Decision to ask for investigation was made with release, September 25, of one of the circus attaches, John Smith from the city hospital where he had confined with grave injuries. Smith, who it is said was thrown against a steel signal post while the train was in motion, is being held in the county jail as a material witness for the State. He is said to have furnished county investigators with names of those who, he alleges, shoved him from the train.

"According to ousted laborers they were called into baggage car of the show train, given \$1.00 only a small portion of what they claimed was due them and then forced from the moving car. Eight of the former circus employees reached Mobile on the morning of September 13, broke and many with cuts and bruises, three having to go to a hospital. Smith, the most seriously injured, had to undergo an operation. The stranded employees were given shelter at the county jail and fed."

The same issue of *Billboard* also contained the following editorial: "LESSON LEARNED BY CERTAIN



CIRCUS MEN YEARS AGO IS APPLICABLE TODAY. Anybody who ever has had the experience of being 'redlighted' by a circus will tell you that under such conditions it's a 'crool,' 'crool' world to live in. Years ago the practice was not uncommon. It probably was considered 'an easy way out' of paying off in full, but eventually they came to their senses and realized that every time the practice was engaged in it was a 'black eye' to the circus business, not to forget the difficult task faced in organizing for subsequent seasons—in finding workingmen who were completely ignorant of the mistreatment according others and were willing to join. It also probably was realized that every time such a practice was indulged in the circus owner was 'digging his own grave' deeper so far as continued operation was concerned.

"Of late years these 'redlighting' tactics have gradually disappeared except in very rare instances, and the circus business in consequence has been put on a higher level. While the practices of years ago were considered more or less brutal, judging by statements made by eyewitnesses reaching us, they could not have been worse than the treatment given scores of workingmen with a certain circus this year. As one eyewitness puts it: 'It was the most fiendish act of brutality I have seen in my 20 years in circus business. Sitting in my berth, I saw workingmen knocked off the train and roll. Some of them would not get up as they were badly hurt. Some were boys, 18 to 20. An old man, who looked like he was between 60 and 65, begged not to be knocked off, and as he held the handle on the coach his hands were beaten loose with a cane.'

"It's regrettable that there has been a return of the tactics of the old days. It is understood that investigations are being made of the case by various authorities, but one thing is certain: Those who were made to suffer will never forget, and the incident is going to be the talk of the circus world for many months to come."

John Smith, the most seriously injured among the workingmen, remained in the hospital where he died in mid-October. Before his death, however, he gave a statement to the county solicitor in Mobile. The October 24, 1931 *Billboard* told this story in an article with headlines, "WORKMAN, DYING, ACCUSES NOBLE OF PUSHING HIM OFF SHOW TRAIN. Mobile, Ala., Oct. 19—John Smith, of Williamson, W. Va., employee of Robbins Bros. Circus, which suddenly closed its 1931 season here September 12, and who was seriously injured when thrown from the circus train the next morning near here, according to his statement was in a dying condition Friday night at City Hospital.



Robbins Bros. cage pulled by four horse hitch in street parade at Pawtucket, R.I., June 24, 1931. Photo by John Cutler (Joe Bradbury Collection).

"County solicitor Marion R. Vickers and his assistants took a dying statement from Smith late Friday. Smith alleged that he was knocked against a switch lamp and injured about the abdomen. Smith, one of the 25 circus employees who, it is claimed, were ejected from the train near here and made their way back to Mobile, hungry and penniless, has been in the hospital ever since he was injured.

"The grand jury of the October term of the Mobile County Circuit, in its investigation this past week of the alleged action of the circus employees in throwing and kicking the men from the train, is reported to have returned indictments against certain parties, charging them with assault to murder. It has also been revealed through an authentic source that warrants have been issued for the arrest of the indicted men.

"Smith, advised that he was about to die, made the following statement in presence of Chief Deputy Sheriff Fred O. Hudoff, of Mobile County, and Robert Cammack, City Hospital attache.

"On Sunday, September 13 last, between 3 and 4 a.m. near the town of Whistler, Ala. I was pushed off Train No. 2 of Robbins Bros. Circus that was moving over tracks of the Mobile & Ohio Railroad Company. I struck a switch post, causing injuries from which I am now suffering. I was pushed off the train by 'Slim' Noble, big top tent boss of Robbins Bros. Circus. I cannot give any reason for Noble's action other than I asked for my pay, which was four weeks overdue. (Signed) John Smith: Fred O. Hudoff, Robert Cammack, witnesses."

After this report in the October 24, 1931 *Billboard* the trade publications have nothing further to say on the matter. Nothing was published as to the names of any indicted, arrested, or brought to trial.

The late George Chindahl, while National Historian of CFA, did some investigating of the Mobile matter and at the time of my first article sent me copies of a letter from the City Hos-

pital in Mobile stating that records at the hospital showed that John Smith died October 17, 1931. Chindahl also wrote to the County Solicitor in Mobile to ascertain whether anyone was ever brought to trial for the death of Smith, but he didn't receive a reply. Chindahl wrote me that he was of the opinion that either someone was negligent in not following up the indictments or that legal authorities in Mobile were unable to locate and arrest the person, or persons indicted. So far as it is known no one ever came to trial.

In spite of the unusual situation concerning its sudden closing Robbins Bros. was the second railroad show casualty of the great depression in 1931, in that it never appeared on the road again. As the summer months wore on and fall appeared business for many of the shows on the road in 1931 dipped considerably. Ringling-Barnum, which had done fairly well in 1930, had it so rough in the summer of 1931 that John Ringling ordered the earliest closing for the show ever, September 14 at Atlanta, Georgia. Although Al G. Barnes, Sells-Floto, and Hagenbeck-Wallace had fairly normal seasons lengthwise; only Sparks continued into November, but ironically it was the only Ringling-owned show which failed to go out in 1932.

Strangely enough, Robbins Bros. had reasonably good business in 1931, much better than the previous season, and had it not been for the events of Mobile the show should have played out a normal route and gone out again in 1932.

We have purposely quoted directly any and all articles concerning the Robbins closing that appeared in the *Billboard*. Since no one was ever convicted, or even brought to trial for that matter, legally all allegations of felonies being committed are still just that, allegations, even if some 52 years have elapsed.

The entire Mobile matter has long since elapsed into folklore, the tales of which have been told by old troupers time and time again. The most consistent story of what happened is that Buchanan pocketed the show's funds and took off for parts unknown while William P. Hall, who had provided financing so it could go on the road,





Stake driver in action on the Robbins Bros. lot at Pawtucket, R.I., June 24, 1931. Photo by John Cutler (Pfening Archives).

was left holding the bag. Hall did repossess the equipment but in all probability Buchanan left with more than the equipment itself was worth. The folklore aspect of the tale has been greatly enhanced by Tom Duncan's novel, *Gus the Great*, published in 1947. The two principal characters in the novel, Gus, and Ivan Pawpucker are based on the lives of Fred Buchanan and William P. Hall. There is some change in locale, the book having the blow-up coming at Corpus Christi, Texas rather than Mobile; and the show being abandoned on the lot by Gus rather than loaded on the train enroute back to quarters, but the situation is the same. Gus departs with the show's money and Pawpucker is stuck with the mess.

The *Billboard* reported that on February 6, 1932, William P. Hall bought, on foreclosure of mortgage the following Robbins Bros. Circus property: five flats, five coaches, two stocks, one elephant car, 46 horses, 20 ring horses, 12 ponies, including harness and saddles, six camels, six elephants, two lions, two leopards, one hyena, monkeys, bears, zebras, wagons and tents. From this list it can be seen that Hall had a mortgage on virtually all of the show's equipment, only two flat cars not being on the list.

One often told old trouper tale has been that the wild west performers were the only ones who got their pay in full after the Mobile close and this was done by gunpoint, the story being that one of the tough cowboys pulled a 45 and demanded that he and his group be paid in full. Just recently a new story has come to light, an account of a trouper with the Robbins concession department that season, who was an eyewitness to the red-lighting incident. It is in the form of a letter written by Robert C. Hunt to Al Pithcaithley dated February 4, 1943. Pithcaithley of course can not vouch for its accuracy but it was written to him by a friend of his at the time and there was no reason for it not to

have been completely truthful. The letter, in part, is as follows:

Chicago, Ill., Feb. 4, 1943

"Hello Al,

I was with the Robbins Bros. Circus the year they did all that red lighting (1931). In fact I was one of the fellows red lighted. I was red lighted at Okalona, Miss., the day after the Mobile affair.

"The way I remember it was that it was on a Saturday that we played Mobile and the show was supposed to jump to Baton Rouge, La. the next day. Earl Sennott, the lot superintendent, announced to the working men that the show would get in very late Sunday and told all the men that wanted their week's pay to be in the number two pie car that night before the train pulled out. Of course all the green hands wanted to get their pay that night so they would have it for Sunday night instead of having to wait until Monday. All of us that had been with the show the previous years knew what was coming up so we stayed out of the pie car.

"The next day I woke up we were in Mississippi so I knew I had been right. I got up, went to the pie car and had breakfast. At the first stop we made I went back to Buchanan's private car and learned that he had left the show three days earlier. I then went to 'Roaring' Ralph [Slim] Noble, who was the canvas boss and a pretty good friend of mine, and told him I was close to home and wanted to know if he could get my pay for me. He had done the same thing a year earlier when the show closed at Pampa, Texas. He did it for me again.

"When I got my pay I went back to my car and rode there the rest of the day. We stopped in Okalona, Miss. to feed and water. When the train was leaving there all the rest of the working men were rounded up and red lighted. As the men went through the pie car they signed their payroll slip and were given a small envelope containing one dollar. I don't know what made them so kind hearted. It was the first year they ever gave the men anything when red lighting them. Guess they were getting soft.



Robbins Bros. light plant wagon on the lot at Pawtucket, R.I., June 24, 1931. Photo by John Cutler (Joe Bradbury Collection).

"As soon as we received the money we were made to jump from the slowly moving train. All of us that could caught on again and went through the whole thing to get another dollar. There were about seventy-five of us red lighted there. It is a very small town and most of the fellows were drunk within an hour. We made so much noise that we disturbed the whole town. The constable, a fat little fellow, made some threats that failed to dampen our spirits, and in desperation the officer wired the railroad headquarters at Jackson and asked them to add an empty box-car onto their next freight headed for St. Louis so he could load us into it and get rid of us.

"About fifteen of us decided to grab the next passenger train and try to catch the show before it got to quarters in Lancaster. We caught the first train. They stopped three times and tried to get rid of us as they left Okalona but as fast as they threw one off two more got on. They gave up and went on. About twenty of us were hanging onto that passenger train in every conceivable place you could imagine a fellow could find a hand hold. One of the fellows fell off at Cairo and was killed. I think it was a guy named Slim Walker. The rest of us got to St. Louis where we were met by about 50 police. Most of us got away and was on the next train that went to Lancaster. We arrived three hours behind the show. Earl Sennott left town half an hour before we arrived. Old man Hall who I think owned the equipment but leased it to Buchanan, met us and tried to talk us out of doing anything to the equipment. He fed us and found places for us to stay.

"We all met that night and went to the train where we destroyed everything that we could. I think we must have done five thousand dollars worth of damage to the train. We also heard that Buck Owens, supposed to be a movie star cowboy, had held Sennott



up while on the train and got away with 14,000 dollars. I saw Owens several years later and he would not deny or confirm the story. The show could not pay off any of the performers after that. The following year Fred Buchanan took out a motorized show and he used the same people, including workmen that had been messed around the year before. He paid them up in full, claiming that Earl Sennott had pulled all that stuff without his consent. Could be. The only men on the train that night when the red lighting was done that had any authority were Earl Sennott, Ralph Noble, and Candy Myers. The three of them may have pulled the stunt and meant to split up but Owens robbed them and they got nothing. I know that none of the three ever amounted to anything after that. I think Myers is dead. Sennott had a novelty joint on a small show and was about broke. Noble is a ticket seller."

This letter written in 1943 some 12 years after the Mobile incident gives an account of what happened on the train after the initial red lighting which came only a few miles out of Mobile. There has never before been anything published concerning these later events, but evidently there were two separate red lightings. The first came early as the "green-horns" got paid off and later when the train was in Mississippi the rest of the workers got theirs, including Hunt. Finally, the events at Lancaster are related in the letter. None of these likewise have ever been published.

The story has also been often told that Buchanan went into hiding immediately after the Robbins close and never appeared publicly in circus business again. Such is not correct. In 1932 he became part owner of the Walter L. Main Circus, a medium sized motorized show, with Jimmy Heron. The *Billboard* told of Buchanan's association with the show as well as with others over the next several years. The 1932 show, incidentally, used three titles during the season, Walter L. Main, then Bostock's, and finally Bill Cody Wild West Circus. In May 1933 the Walter L. Main property was taken over by Tom Gorman as a result of a court judgment. Gorman then used the title of World Bros. Circus on the former Main show equipment. It is believed Bucha-

nan remained with Gorman and his World Bros. show in some capacity.

CHS member Frank J. Mara tells this interesting story regarding Tom Gorman and Fred Buchanan. "I remember in the fall of 1933, watching as a boy, while they pushed a small truck lettered World Bros. into a winter quarters barn in Jersey City, N.J. This outfit came out the following spring as Gorman Bros. I visited once in a while during the winter but saw very little—the one elephant Jap, Ray Goody practicing on the wire just before opening, and moving two bears from a shipping cage into one of the two small semi cage trucks. The Gorman Bros. show lasted for three seasons or less, going downhill, 1934–36, showing in Jersey City each year, although it wintered elsewhere in New Jersey after the first winter. Over the years I learned that Tom Gorman was a partner with others (possibly he was a front man) and still later that Fred Buchanan was in on it. The last seems quite reasonable because of the World Bros. connection and also that he was reported during the 30's as being seen on show lots on the Long Island, N.Y. area. This is the same metropolitan New York City area as New Jersey (northern part) is in."

The *Billboard* does indeed list Fred Buchanan as manager of Gorman Bros. Circus in 1934 with Tom Gorman as owner. Rumors have also persisted over the years that Buchanan was a part owner of the show. It has never been determined if he was with the show until the end. About 1935 Buchanan dropped from sight in the circus world and was never again mentioned in any of the trade publications as being active in the business. It is at this time that Buchanan went "into hiding" as the old troupers like to put it.

William P. Hall died shortly after he repossessed the Robbins Bros. animals and equipment in February 1932. There was no demand for railroad show equipment for several years so the property remained stored at the Hall farm in Lancaster. In the summer of 1934 Hall's heirs sold the Robbins steam calliope, the former

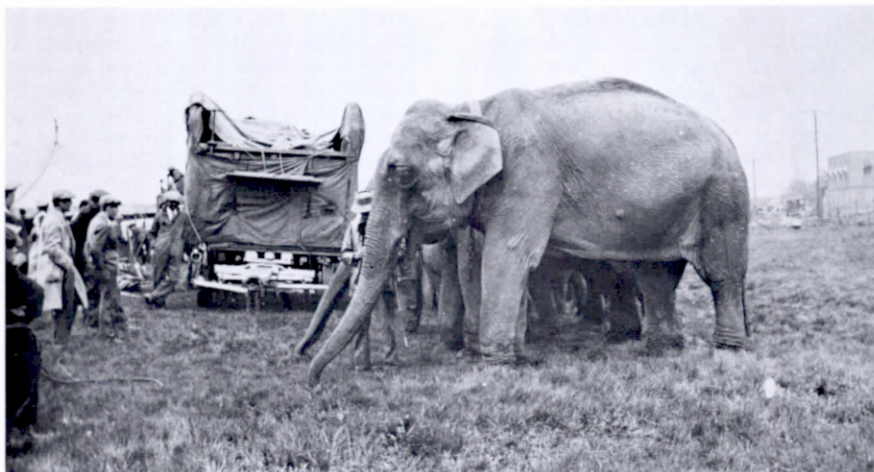
**Robbins Bros. on the lot, season of 1931. In foreground is the five pole menagerie tent with big top in rear. Pfening Archives.**



Barnum & Bailey Clown and Horn, to R.J. Reynolds Jr. of tobacco fame. It was loaded on a flat car and shipped from Lancaster to his home in North Carolina. In the fall of 1934 the Hall heirs sold the remainder of the Robbins equipment to Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell for use on their new Cole Bros. Circus. The property was shipped to their quarters in Rochester, Indiana. Details of the Robbins equipment going to Adkins and Terrell were told in my article in the May-June 1965 *Bandwagon*. Former rail cars of Robbins going to the new Cole show included 5 flats, 3 stocks, and 7 coaches, the latter consisting of the 5 used in 1931 plus the advertising car and Buchanan's private car, Rover, which were not carried that season. Of special interest was that three of the four pony floats which were sent back to Granger quarters in mid-season 1930 had made their way to Lancaster and were included in the Robbins equipment going to Adkins and Terrell. The three floats were Mother Goose, Old Woman in Shoe, and Cinderella. The Santa Claus float remained in Granger and eventually rotted away with all of the other wagons there with the exception of the Two Hemispheres wagon which was rescued in the early 1930's. Bill Woodcock Sr. said that the three pony floats were sent out with a merchant's parade unit, which were popular in those days. In time the pony floats were returned to Lancaster. These were the only wagons going to Granger in mid-season 1930 that ever got to Lancaster.

In retrospect the Robbins redlighting in 1931 was one of the most significant events of circus history during the 1930's, at least one of the most talked about among old troupers. It ranks right up there with the 1938 Ringling-Barnum strike, the 1934 Hagenbeck-Wallace street parade, the framing of the Cole Bros. Circus by Adkins and Terrell in 1935, John Ringling's loss of his circus empire to the bankers in 1932, and John Ringling North's coming to power in 1938. History has tagged on to Fred Buchanan one of the worst reputations of any circus owner; however, it is my personal opinion that it was the 1931 redlighting that caused it more than anything else. Mr. Hunt's letter seemed to imply that redlightings were commonplace with the Robbins show of that day; however, if that is true, they occurred with no publicity at all in the trade publications. After the 1923 campaign of the *Billboard* to publicize any and all incidences of mistreatment of show personnel, grift, and such it is doubtful that anything of this nature could have taken place without their knowledge. Through research into the various Buchanan shows of the mid and late 1920's have





proven they were not as bad as described by many old troupers. In fact they have been highly praised by some for their top quality in printed reports in the trade publications and elsewhere as well as by eyewitnesses. Buchanan must have been well thought of and enjoyed a good reputation in his home state of Iowa to have in attendance nearly every opening day the governor and other high state officials. As mentioned earlier after about 1936 Buchanan then fades from the circus scene. In an article by Adrian Sharpe printed in the November-December 1970 *Bandwagon* he wrote that Buchanan died in 1959 at the age of 87. Nothing definite as to the site of burial has ever been published. Some say it was on the private property of an acquaintance of his in New York state.

Epilog. This installment now brings

Robbins Bros. elephants on the lot at Marion, Ind., May 16, 1931. Photo by George Piercy (Gordon M. Potter Collection in Pfening Archives).

to a close the Fred Buchanan Railroad Circuses, 1923-31. There was a separate installment for each of the nine seasons covered. All of these back issues are in print and copies may be obtained from the editor. In addition to the photo supplement mentioned earlier, a major article on the Buchanan quarters at Granger, Iowa is also planned. CHS director Joe Rettinger has been given the assignment to prepare this article and he has spent a number of years in research which has included several personal visits to the site and contact of persons in the area familiar with the old quarters. Of prime interest will be many "new" photos of the quarters which have

never before been published and are being reserved for this article.

It has been my policy to acknowledge in the text of the various installments those persons, institutions, libraries, etc. which have been helpful with the research and illustrative effort for this project. I sincerely regret if anyone has been overlooked. Without the help of so many this article would not have been possible.

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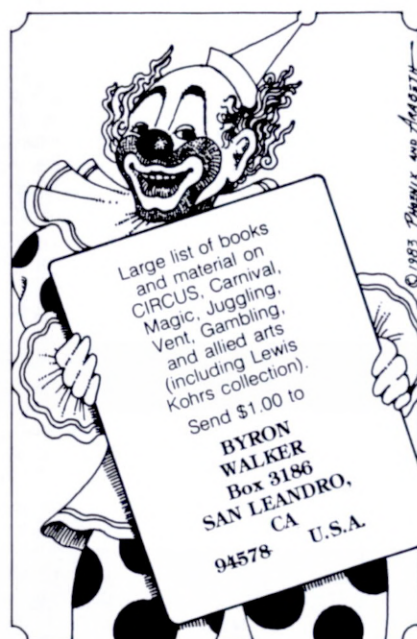
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# LUDLOW AND SMITH:

## CIRCUS PROPRIETORS OF THE 1840'S

By John F. Polacsek

Circus proprietors are not always born with sawdust in their blood, and many trace their roots to other fields. Gilbert R. Spalding once ran a drug and paint store; Adam Forepaugh and William P. Hall were dealers in horses and mules; and H.H. Tammen and F.G. Bonfils published *The Denver Post* before they put the prototype of the Sells-Floto show on the road. Noah Ludlow and Sol Smith were theatre managers, an occupation similar to that of circus proprietor, before they ventured into the sawdust arena.

Ludlow and Smith were circuit riders of the frontier theatre who combined their experience and savings in 1835 to manage a theatre in Mobile, Alabama. During the summer of 1836 they expanded their field to include the city of St. Louis, thereby creating a theatrical monopoly there which held until 1840. During these years the circus was a rival to the two upcoming theatre managers.

In April of 1838 Smith wrote to Ludlow, who had taken a group of actors to Mobile, about the problems he encountered when the Cole, Miller, Yale & Company Circus came to St. Louis. "The Circus here injures our gallery which don't average over \$20 a night — but I think they are getting the worst of it." The circus went so far as to reduce its price of admission to 50 and 25 cents, but even with these cuts their receipts were only \$4.50 one night, and Smith claimed that the circus performance "did not injure us much that night."

Misfortune sometimes eliminates competition, and such was the case in the city of New Orleans where a major theatre was destroyed by fire in 1840. Seeing a chance to break into a new field, Smith proceeded to the Crescent City to procure a theatre for the partnership. He found that no appropriate building could be obtained, and decided to adapt something else. He had heard about a new circus amphitheatre being built, but found it to be "nothing but a stable." The walls of the building were only twenty feet high, but it had possibilities. So Smith sought out the owners and drew up a contract. Under the terms of the contract he was to be the lessee for five years at \$10,000 per year, and the new theatre to be built was to be called the American Theatre.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as the negotiations were concluded, the design of the building was taken into consideration. Ludlow

pressed for a combination of dramatic and equestrian performances under the same roof. According to Ludlow this idea of having a building with removable seats and a sawdust ring had been a favorite scheme of his. He favored it—provided it could be done in a style superior to any he had previously seen in the United States. Smith likewise was convinced, and believed that if the performance could be conducted "without any of the sawdust attendants that present themselves in circuses," it just might work.<sup>3</sup>

As neither of them were capable of directing a troupe of equestrians, the next step was to find an intelligent equestrian director. The answer to their quest was John Robinson, later a circus legend, then a very energetic, skillful, and reliable man. During the spring of 1840 negotiations were opened with Robinson's equestrian troupe, and a two year contract was drawn up.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the great two-horse and four-horse rider, John Robinson, his foster son Little Jimmy came with him. According to Ludlow the eight year old Jimmy was a fearless rider, with an intelligent look, and flowing ringlets of hair. As the child's name was not quite appropriate, he was re-

The great John Robinson spent two years in Ludlow and Smith's employ. This photo shows Robinson late in life after he had his own circus for many years. Pfening Archives.



christened Master Juan Hernandez. This young, talented performer "could execute the most difficult and dangerous equestrian feats, besides singing comic songs and acting children's parts on the stage."<sup>5</sup>

The next consideration was to secure a group of horses for the performance. Robinson secured two or three trained steeds from the manager of a broken-up circus, and added some untrained fancy horses. These new horses were quickly trained, and were useful as ornaments. Two of the mounts had glossy black spots on their white coats, and Robinson christened them "Ludlow and Smith." All of the animals were decked out in new trappings to make their grand entries something to behold.<sup>6</sup>

Before any grand entries could take place, the performers and horses needed much rehearsal. As soon as the St. Louis theater ended its spring season on July 4th, 1840, changes were made to accommodate the equestrians. The carpenters immediately went to work removing the seats from the pit of the theatre to clear the way for ring performances. As Ludlow relates, this was done with a view of getting the untrained horses and a few riders into good condition.<sup>7</sup>

Ludlow and Smith's new equestrian venture was a well known project in the circus field. In August a letter from A.L. Pickering of Philadelphia arrived in which he offered his services in their new "Equestrian Theatre."<sup>8</sup> Mr. Pickering's request for employment, however, went unheeded. Later that summer a letter from the Fogg & Stickney Circus arrived proposing a union. This equestrian company had some noted riders and clowns among whom were John Stickney, Ben Stickney, Sam Stickney, Nicholas Johnson, and Joseph Foster. Smith stated that he would agree to hire them if they would bring lights, riders and horses, and a place to perform.<sup>9</sup>

Before this company could be engaged, the theatre reopened in St. Louis with Robinson's group on September 1, 1840. The equestrian performances failed to draw crowds, and Ludlow claimed that it was because some of Fogg & Stickney's best riders had not joined them yet.<sup>10</sup> About the last of October the theatre closed, and Robinson's troupe embarked on a steamboat for New Orleans.

There was little that could rival the American Theatre in New Orleans.



The building fronted on Poydras Street and the west side on St. Francis Street. The interior was "light, airy, and beautiful: the circle was in the form of a horseshoe, the parquet large, with three tiers or circles above; the whole capable of accommodating about twelve hundred persons."<sup>11</sup> When the horses were wanted for ring performances or for practice, they were brought from a stable a block away. The seats and floor of the parquet were removed, and a sawdust ring appeared. One could scarcely believe that a sawdust arena existed in the center of such richness and finery.<sup>12</sup>

The new American Theatre was opened to the public on November 10, 1840 with dramatic performances being presented upon the stage. Ludlow's dream came true on November 19th when equestrians also performed under the same roof amid a spectacular background. The circus consisted of John Robinson, W.B. Carroll, Mr. Foster, Mr. Harrington, Mr. Woods, Mr. W. Lake, Mr. Rogers, Mr. Jackson, Mr. M. Anders, Juan Hernandez, and Master Petty.<sup>13</sup>

The house was well filled that first night as the audience was treated to both dramatic and equestrian performances. The thespians presented the "Comedy of the Liar," after which the equestrians made their appearance in a grand entree entitled the "Greeks Preparing for Battle." This spectacle was produced by having ten horses and riders in splendid trappings come into the ring. The performance was concluded by a display of horsemanship by Robinson and Hernandez. Master Hernandez was a great hit that first night as the crowd not only showered applause on the young rider, but requested him to walk his horse around the ring while the ladies loaded him with bouquets.<sup>14</sup>

For the rest of November and into December the crowds were entertained with a variety of productions. The programs included equestrian melodramas entitled "Timour the Tartar," "The Forty Thieves," "El Hyder," "The Cataract of the Ganges," and "Mazeppa or the Wild Horse of Tartary." The Mazeppa piece was based upon an episode in the life of Ivan Mazeppa, a Cossack chief who was bound to the back of a wild horse as punishment for an offense. The horse was turned loose and carried Mazeppa out on the steppe where he was eventually rescued.<sup>15</sup>

Not only were new equestrian melodramas produced in the ring, but a new troupe of equestrians was hired. The Fogg & Stickney Circus, which had written to Smith a few months prior, was engaged. The contract paid them \$700 per week to perform in the American Theatre and elsewhere until the 1st of April 1841. There was an additional stipulation that Fogg &

## FOGG & STICKNEY'S CIRCUS.



### Grand Entertainment.

For two days only, Friday and Saturday, 29th and 30th of May, at G. W. Snider's.

**T**HE Managers of the Philadelphia Amphitheatre, in offering their unparalleled list of attractions for the patronage of the public, beg to assure them that the strictest scrutiny is paid to the character and selection of the amusements they present with their extensive and beautiful Stud of Horses, and a very numerous company of highly popular Equestrian Artists, including such a combination of talent, as has never on a former occasion been presented to an American audience. — The entertainments which they will bring forward are marked by variety, novelty and splendor, and they doubt not but their exertions to cater for the public will insure to them that patronage and support equal to the immense outlay they have been at for the purpose of producing everything in the strictest observance to perfection.

The Managers respectfully announce to the citizens of Chambersburg and vicinity that they have at an immense expense, added to their already extensive and unrivalled company the renowned Spanish performer, "Sigi Lecaraquene," and his pupil, "Master Busilico," whose unrivalled performances in the principal theatres throughout Europe and America, have drawn forth the most enthusiastic applause. They have been universally pronounced the greatest performers in the world. — Though the managers have been at an immense expense in securing the services of these celebrated performers, there will be no extra charge for admission.

Boxes 50 cents, Pit 25. Children under 12 years of age half price to the Boxes, only. Performances to commence at 2 o'clock P. M. and 7½ in the evening.

The Fogg and Stickney Circus was engaged by Ludlow and Smith not long after they published this ad in the *Chambersburg, Pa. Repository and Whig* of May 21, 1840. Circus World Museum Collection.

Stickney should not perform during the present season of the American Theatre in New Orleans, and that for one year, they should not perform in the city of St. Louis, except under the direction of Ludlow and Smith, or in corporation with them.<sup>16</sup> This second troupe was engaged because both Ludlow and Smith felt this prevented their going to any other theatre in town, rather than making a large financial gain.<sup>17</sup>

The contract was signed, and Fogg & Stickney agreed to come from Mobile where they were performing until December 26th. A few of the equestrians arrived early, for Eaton Stone was involved in a melodramatic spec-

tacle in December. In one of the scenes of "Timour the Tartar," two knights, Ben DeBar, and Stone, performed a fight on horseback with javelins. Although DeBar was not an equestrian he performed a variety of equestrian feats, and did not call upon a stand-in when the production of Mazeppa was presented.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to new performances in both the dramatic and equestrian line, the New Year brought a dancer by the name of Master John Diamond to the American. The manager of this dancer was none other than P.T. Barnum. Barnum was promoting Diamond, a lad about sixteen years of age who blackened his face and hands and performed Negro dances. As Ludlow described it he could "twist his feet and legs, while dancing, into more fantastic forms than I ever witnessed before or since in any human being."<sup>19</sup> Diamond only performed a few nights between plays and farces, as Barnum had bigger things on his mind.

Barnum offered his services to James H. Caldwell, the owner of the St. Charles Theatre, and a major competitor of Ludlow and Smith, and was hired. On the 19th of January a grand dancing match was held at the St. Charles between Diamond and a Negro dancer from Kentucky. A wager of \$250 was the prize, and four persons were seated on the stage to act as judges. Out on the stage came the two dancers, and both went through their acts. They both "cut, squatted, turned, and twisted," and when it was all over a tall man came forward to announce that Master Diamond had won the wager. Barnum was learning to humbug early, for the receipts of the American Theatre that night were only \$400, while the St. Charles made nearly \$2000.<sup>20</sup>

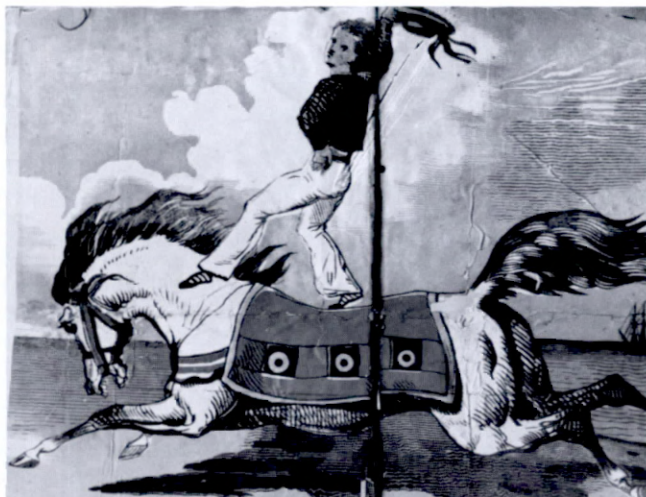
Lessons were to be learned, and the new day found Sol Smith in charge of a company of equestrians headed upstream on the Mississippi River bound for Natchez, Mississippi. With two equestrian troupes to contend with, it was deemed advisable to divide forces, leaving Robinson and his people in New Orleans, and putting Fogg & Stickney's tent and troupe to good advantage on the road. Now twenty three men, and a dozen horses were heading north. As the paddlewheels of the *S.B. Vicksburgh* carried the Fogg and Stickney Circus northward, Smith began writing in his memorandum book:

January 20, 1841 — Going to the City of Natchez with a Company of *Equestrians!!* Detached from the American Theatre, N. Orleans . . . The steamboat is bulging along at a fine rate. Capt. Grice very clever fellow — travelled with him last summer to Louisville — lots of cockroaches then — none now that I see.





The circus at the American Theater in New Orleans resembled this scene from a poster of the period. This bill is probably from the Aron Turner Circus in 1850. Hertzberg Circus Collection, San Antonio Public Library.



Circuses generally meant riding acts during the early 1840s. This poster is probably from the Aron Turner Circus in 1850. Hertzberg Circus Collection, San Antonio Public Library.

January 22, 18941 – Natchez – Mud! Mud!! Mud!!! Last night at 11 o'clock a cavalcade of 12 Horsemen might have been seen, (if it had not been so dark that you could scarce see your hand before you!) wending their uncertain way up the hill of Natchez – this mud and mire that reached up to the bellies of the animals at every step! It was the equestrians of the American Theatre, headed by the writer hereof, We are at the City Hotel. I threw my bridle to a dark groom who welcomed our arrival with 3 cheers – got a stump of a candle in a bottle – was shown a cold room, containing a bed, wash stand, an odd volume of "Pin Money" a novel . . .

January 23, 1841 – First night of my circus management *under canvas!* Dont admire the occupation much – kept the box-office myself, to save expense, Receipts about \$200, rather dark, I thought, for a good effect – remedy all that tomorrow.

January 25, 1841 – Circus Stock rising! Receipts tonight over \$370. – this inactive life will never do for me – never, must use more exercise – must. Toddled about a little today – attended to the little business I have to attend to . . . Paid the Mayor \$50 for privilege of performing – sold tickets at the box-office – counted the house when all was over – chatted half hour with the equestrian manager – filled up this space – and now – go to bed.<sup>21</sup>

Smith was none too pleased with the circus in Natchez. Once the canvas tent was erected and a few duties

taken care of he had little to do. The paying of a local license fee was required in most counties and cities. Another necessity was to send complimentary tickets to the local newspaper editors. These tickets were not always used as intended; in one instance, Smith had a gentleman come up to the box office and present a complimentary ticket and a note. The note was an excuse from a local editor stating that he could not attend, and was sending a substitute in his place. The nerve of some people, Smith thought.<sup>22</sup>

Ludlow was kept informed about the doings in Natchez. Smith's depression was getting worse. In one letter written while the company was "out parading – or rather *wading* thro' the town," Smith noted that the daily receipts were averaging \$200. The night shows were preferred by the local people as a day show had only been attended by nine or ten people. He was of the opinion that they should abandon the "idea of going to Vicksburgh – they say the mud is deeper & thicker there than here."<sup>23</sup>

The weather was a major obstacle throughout the stay in Natchez, even with a tent. As Smith put it:

A beautiful house knocked in the head by the rain again! Parade all thrown away just as we opened the door it began to pour, moderately, and before the 2d act of horsemanship was over, everything was deluged – the canvas leaks like a sieve, the horse up to his buttocks in the water in the ring!! The few ladies who were there vanished, wet to the skin!! Not withstanding all this, our fellows went through like Trojans and the receipts were \$123, besides a few trinkets sold at the bar . . .<sup>24</sup>

Muddy parades and performers were not the only things on Smith's mind. He wrote to Ludlow on the subject of getting rid of Fogg and Stickney, for

as Smith saw the situation they had "stuck our feet in it in engaging Fogg & Stickney but it can't be helped now."<sup>25</sup> He even approached I.M. Scott, a theatrical manager who was building a theatre in Natchez, and inquired if he would be willing to take them off their hands. The response was negative for Scott "will venture nothing toward helping us out of the scrape by engaging Fogg & Stickney's Company, for the balance of the time."<sup>26</sup>

The circus in Natchez lasted only seven nights, and at the end of the engagement the tent was struck, and the troupe headed downriver to New Orleans. The receipts for the venture were \$1850, but the best part was that the American Theatre had been relieved of the expenses of twenty-three people and twelve horses for nearly two weeks. In an effort to keep expenses down, the two equestrian troupes were combined and they opened under canvas in the Third Municipality of New Orleans, near the United States Mint.<sup>27</sup>

The idea of combining troupes for performances in large cities was not new, and another combination was headed for New Orleans. Two menageries united, that of Humphrey & Company and D.R. Lines & Company, were to open in the rear of the Log Cabin on St. Charles Street on February 24, 1841. In addition to the circus, a rhinoceros, Arabian pack camels, royal bengal tigers, an immense living anaconda, and the two elephants, Columbus and Hannibal were coming.

The grand entree of this combined menagerie and circus was delayed at Algiers, a town opposite New Orleans, on the 23rd when the elephant Colum-





Three and four horses riders were the stars of circuses of the period as shown in this poster, probably of the Aron Turner show in 1850. Hertzberg Circus Collection, San Antonio Public Library.

bus went on a rampage. The story as it was printed in the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* on February 24, noted that an elephant killed a man on horseback near Algiers, and the elephant was attached to the Humphrey & Lines Menagerie. A follow-up article on the 26th noted that the individual who was killed, William Crumb, was a native of Virginia, and he had been the keeper of the elephant for the past eight months.<sup>28</sup>

An eyewitness account of the affair was printed in the *Cincinnati Chronicle* in 1869, copied in the *New York Clipper*, and reprinted in the *White Tops* in December 1940 in the article "The First Circus Elephants in America." The source of the article was Louis Lipman, an equestrian with the show. As he related the story the date was December 31, 1839 (fourteen months earlier) and it was two of Raymond & Waring's extensive circus and menagerie companies that were involved. The two menageries were showing in Louisiana, and were to combine for the big New Orleans performance. The parade was to march into town on New Year's Day, Lipman continued, and for this the two elephants were brought together. They immediately proceeded to test each other, and were broken apart by their keepers. The elephant Hannibal quieted down, but Columbus was still restless.

With little warning Columbus struck his keepers's horse with his trunk, and thrust his tusks through the animals's body. The keeper, Crumb, fell from the horse, and was immediately picked up by Columbus and dashed to the ground, killing him instantly. Columbus then proceeded along the parade until he reached the llama cage, demolished it, and killed the llama. His next movement was toward John Robinson, the celebrated four horse equestrian, but he was unharmed because he was on a fleet horse. The

elephant then went into Algiers where a driver of a dray and his two mules were victims. A slave was wrenched off a fence, and dispatched, a deed which cost the owners of the menagerie \$1800. It was not until Columbus received three bullets from a rifle below the right eye that he decided to give up.<sup>29</sup>

Lipman's story is factual; however, one can draw a wrong conclusion based on his presentation. In Richard E. Conover's book *Give 'Em A John Robinson* this same article was used to prove that John Robinson was associated with the Zoological Institute in the 1830s. In cross checking John Robinson's biography Conover claims that he was employed by the Zoological Institute before being engaged by Ludlow and Smith. However, it is known that at the time John Robinson was under contract to Ludlow and Smith, and most probably was just visiting the show. In addition to seeing friends, Robinson may have lined up an elephant because Columbus made stage appearance for Ludlow and Smith a few weeks later.<sup>30</sup>

While Robinson was contracting the elephant, Smith was trying to find a way to get rid of Fogg & Stickney. In a letter to Ludlow, who had gone to St. Louis on February 21st, Smith noted that there were only five weeks and 4/7ths of the engagement with Fogg & Stickney yet to be fulfilled. Various thoughts came to him as he counted down the days to April 1st. If he could send Fogg & Stickney away from New Orleans when their contract ran out they would not be in town as competition. One place for Fogg & Stickney to go would be Mobile, or they could be sent to Natchez where they would play a week, take a week to travel north to Vicksburg, and play out their option there. By sending them up the river he believed that he would "get rid of \$2100 expenses (allowing the affair pays, and it will, something over, after deducting all expenses)."<sup>31</sup> Thus the weekly fee of \$700 would be offset by any profits from performances. After consulting with Fogg & Stickney it was decided that they should go to Mobile to run out their contract. The circus opened in Mobile on March 18, and played until April 15. While Fogg & Stickney were in Mobile, Robinson with Hernandez and Eldred were performing in New Orleans.

The best laid plans sometimes fail to work, and Fogg & Stickney returned to New Orleans after their engagement in Mobile. To add insult to injury they decided to erect their tent within a stone's throw of the American Theatre. This action unnerved Smith for he was alone as Ludlow had gone to St. Louis. Fogg & Stickney's appearance in New Orleans appeared to be a violation of

their contract with Ludlow and Smith, and Smith wanted action on the matter.

He consulted a lawyer after Fogg & Stickney advertised that they were going to open their circus on April 18th, and was advised that he should let the circus play one night, for until they did perform there was no breach of agreement. The night of the 18th the circus opened under canvas, and the next day Smith obtained a \$2500 security deposit and a writ of injunction against Fogg & Stickney. He even authorized his lawyer to approach the circus, and state that if they were to move their tent to the lower part of town they might be allowed to play in New Orleans.<sup>32</sup>

A lot happened that day, and Smith penned a letter to Ludlow that night, with the opening line stating that "I am about to have my head knocked off tomorrow, I will write you tonight, and give you such information as I have." The letter mentioned that he had obtained his writ of injunction, and officers of the court had served it on Fogg & Stickney. That night after dinner he went to the box office and saw Fogg & Stickney's canvas lighted, but shortly after the lights went out and the injunction took effect. Sometimes it pays to let the courts settle disputes, and Smith must have felt good about legally stopping the competition.

His jubilation was short lived for about 9 o'clock who should walk into the box office but Mr. Stickney, Mr. North, Mr. Smith, Mr. Wood, and two or three others from the circus. Smith was alone and slightly outnumbered — a situation he could not ignore. Stickney asked him if he wished the services of his equestrians, and he replied "No Sir — we have had enough of you I Believe." Being a persistent fellow, Stickney then repeated the question, and said that he wished an answer for he had brought reliable witnesses to hear it.

The mood in the box office was not a good one with a confrontation very possible, and Smith knew it. He told Stickney that "I have no time to answer questions, especially when put to me in that manner, and I beg you will leave the office as you have interrupted me in selling tickets." Stickney's reply was very blunt for he stated "If when I meet you in the street, G-d damn you, I'll knock your d-d head off!" He decided that at this point discretion was the better part of valor, and asked the unwanted guests to leave the box office. He further stated that he had already answered "no" very distinctly and several times, and added that he did not wish to talk to a man who broke a contract.

Stickney immediately called Smith a "d-d liar" and began to wave his fists trying to corner him. It was



Smith's rule that "when called a liar, I found I must either quit selling tickets or have a fight (and most probably a licking - there being 4 or 5 of them)." Discreetly he stepped to the door of the box office and called for an officer to take the bullies into custody. Before the officer arrived, however, the gentlemen walked out prophesying what may happen the next day. A little later Smith received another guest in the box office who served him with a notice to appear in court on April 21st.<sup>33</sup>

The day of the court hearing arrived, and the motion to dissolve the injunction was heard by the judge. Fogg & Stickney presented the case that it was after the April 1st contract date, and they should be allowed to play anywhere they wished, having severed their bonds with Ludlow and Smith. Smith simply relied upon the material that had been presented for the injunction, and the matter was left up to the judge. The ruling sustained the injunction, stating that as long as the season of the American Theatre lasted, Fogg & Stickney could not open their circus in New Orleans.

In an attempt to settle ruffled feathers, Smith's lawyer again offered to withdraw all proceedings if Fogg & Stickney would move to the lower part of the city. Fogg & Stickney were advised by their lawyer to accept the offer, but they would not be swayed and stated that "they'd be d-d if they would." In a surprise move they requested their lawyer to draw up an immediate bill of sale of the circus even before they had a buyer. Their lawyer declined to do so, and the circus troupe went off "to consummate their roguery elsewhere" as Smith put it.<sup>34</sup>

That night the circus of Fogg & Stickney was sold and all the equestrians were discharged as each was given a written notice. The catch to the affair was that they were informed that positions were available with the new owner, Green Johnson, the show's clown. Smith was fit to be tied for "although it is clear as the Sun which is shining on this paper it is a fraudulent sale, made for the purpose of evading the injunction, yet I cannot go into Court and swear to it."<sup>35</sup> As it stood, all the members of the equestrian troupe were hired by Johnson, but the former owners, Fogg & Stickney could not perform, at least until the season at the American Theatre ended.

To further make Ludlow and Smith look like villains, stories were circulated to discredit them. They were portrayed as being in the wrong for trying to monopolize the circus patronage of the city. It was made known that they were depriving Stickney and his family of making a livelihood, although Smith claimed that he could open a riding school if he wish-



**James H. Caldwell (1793-1863), Ludlow and Smith's great rival in New Orleans, who hired the Fogg and Stickney Circus after its blow-up with Ludlow and Smith. Author's Collection.**

ed. Smith believed that he should just sit tight and wait out the storm of abuse.

There was enough on Smith's mind for in addition to running the American Theatre, he had fought Fogg & Stickney in court, and was now in competition with the Johnson/Fogg & Stickney Circus.

Smith attempted to open the circus in Lafayette, a suburb of New Orleans, under canvas, calling it the American Theater Circus Company. Up until this time he had relied upon the canvas supplied by Fogg & Stick-

**Noah Miller Ludlow (1791-1886), Sol Smith's partner, who watched the theatrical end of their business while Smith was playing circus. Author's Collection.**



ney, but now had to obtain his own circus tent. He had problems getting the necessary supplies, and his poles and canvas were not finished. If all went well he could open his circus the same night that the Johnson/Fogg & Stickney show was to open.<sup>36</sup>

Another matter to be considered were requests for employment with the "equestrian theatre." A letter from George W. Sergeant of Cincinnati arrived inquiring about the possibility of an opening with Ludlow and Smith. Sergeant specialized in single horse riding, and in the year previous had been on the roster of the Fogg & Stickney Circus.<sup>36</sup> After consulting with the equestrian director, Smith wrote Ludlow that Robinson believed they had riders enough, and if they were to hire anyone else it should be a slack rope walker, or a similar attraction to add variety to the entertainment.<sup>38</sup>

Smith may have been a little hesitant about hiring a former Fogg & Stickney employee for he was having problems with the ones he had on hand. While the Johnson/Fogg & Stickney Circus was out parading through town one day, they were joined by a Mr. Nelson, a rider under contract with Ludlow and Smith. The man was given hell that night by Smith who knew that he was a "mean sort, and I suspected so from the first time I saw him."<sup>39</sup>

No matter what he felt, he was determined not to interfere with Fogg & Stickney anymore. He reminded Ludlow of an old proverb in that they had "sued a beggar, and caught." He also claimed that it was a magnificent error in judgement to engage Fogg & Stickney at all. It cost them \$8,200, and as he stated the money was "literally thrown into the dirt - besides the expense of keeping their infernal spotted and piebold horses!" He was "mighty sick of the whole four footed race - and almost regret we had anything to do with any Circus business at all."<sup>40</sup>

But the circus business continued, for the equestrians under Robinson opened the night of April 22 in Lafayette. The crowd for the first night only brought forth \$106, not too good after the cost of canvassing, the seats, lamps, lumber, and paraphernalia were taken into consideration. The small attendance was the result of the Johnson/Fogg & Stickney Circus opening across from the American Circus that same night.<sup>41</sup>

The two circuses continued to compete with each other for a week or so, and there was talk in New Orleans that Fogg and Stickney intended to go up the river ahead of Smith and his troupe of equestrians. There was no doubt in his mind that Stickney "will put himself out of the way hundreds of miles to do so."<sup>42</sup> Not only would



this action diminish any profits on the northward trip, but if Fogg & Stickney played in St. Louis they would again be in violation of the contract.

Fears became reality for on May 1st the tent was struck and the Johnson/Fogg & Stickney Circus headed up the river. Smith wrote Ludlow that he was having nightmares about it for he had "pictured to myself, their confounded troupe riding over you in St. Louis, rough shod!" To remedy the situation Smith came to the conclusion that he would send the equestrians to St. Louis immediately. They would remain in town the rest of the week, and then catch a steamboat north. Ludlow was informed that he would need to close the theatre for three nights and prepare the sawdust arena. Hopefully the circus would find the theatre ready for them, and they could begin performances so Ludlow could fortify himself "against the traitor, Fogg & Stickney."<sup>43</sup>

In an effort to give Ludlow and Smith an edge when Fogg & Stickney arrived the theatre was made ready, and the equestrians were sent north. A friend wrote to Ludlow stating that he should "Open your ring at once with a handsome flourish and cut their ungrateful throats!"<sup>44</sup> Such was the attitude which caused Smith to send his equestrians upstream on the premise that they would beat Fogg & Stickney to St. Louis.

Fogg & Stickney, however, may have learned a bit of humbug from Barnum, for no sooner had Smith sent his troupe north than they returned to New Orleans. To make matters worse they were engaged by Caldwell, the owner of the St. Charles Theatre, who was interested in adding a circus to his performances for toward the end of April Smith noted that he was in constant attendance at the circus.<sup>45</sup> The whole affair appears to have been a ruse to both monopolize the circus in town and to get around the injunction. Smith fell for it, and although the season at the American still continued with dramatic performances, he decided to let the affair rest. Not only did Ludlow and Smith lose profits by bypassing the river towns, but they brought their circus into a hostile environment.

Ludlow and Smith's St. Louis theatre season of 1841 commenced on April 26th, but the circus did not appear until the second week of May. The first performance did not draw a large house and receipts were only \$169, and the second night they only netted \$41. Ludlow believed that the dwindling receipts were the result of a national financial crisis. As he saw the matter, the pressure of the money market became heavy causing people to pull their purse strings tight, "and few felt like spending more money than absolute necessity demanded."<sup>46</sup>



Sol Smith (1801-1869), the western theater impresario, who unhappily stumbled into the circus business, and found it not to his liking. Author's Collection.

Smith had a different opinion of the matter, and he blamed the small receipts on the people of St. Louis for as he saw it "equestrian performances in a theatre were not encouraged at all." Furthermore he wrote a rebuttle to an attack on the theatre that had been presented in the eulogy by Rev. Artemus Bullard on the occasion of President Harrison's death in April 1841. In the funeral sermon Rev. Bullard stated that the St. Louis theatres "have become too degraded for any purposes but the exhibition of brute animals and the most abandoned of the human family, male and female." As Smith observed the situation, "If our theatres are degraded by the introduction of 'brute animals,' the degeneration must be attributed rather to the taste of the public than to the wishes and inclinations of the directors."<sup>47</sup>

What ever the reason, moral or financial, the equestrian troupe made ready for a cross country season. The troupe was under the direction of John Robinson, and James P. Bailey, the principal clerk of Ludlow and Smith, acted as financial manager and treasurer. Their instructions were to begin in Kentucky, and proceed south through Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana to meet in New Orleans early in November.<sup>48</sup> No details of the show's route are known, but after touring through the Ohio River Valley the show rejoined Ludlow and Smith's theater company at Memphis, Tennessee in November 1841. Possibly the financial condition of the country would not allow an extended season in the southern states, but the circus did rejoin the thespians on their way to New Orleans.

The circus was rough and ragged when it returned from its cross country venture, and it brought back a pocketful of "bills receivable" signed by their agent J.P. Bailey, for salaries due. The costumes which had been pro-

duced for grand entries were threadbare and shabby, and unfit for a parade. This being the case, the circus was smuggled off the boat at Lafayette, just above New Orleans, and directed not to show themselves until rested and refitted.<sup>49</sup>

Seven days later the equestrian troupe appeared in the streets of the city. Although the riders and horses were rested and their trappings repaired, their appearance at the American Theatre did little to increase attendance. In an effort to lighten expenses, the tent was again erected in a distant part of the city, this time in the Third Municipality at Lafayette.

Ludlow and Smith had already learned a valuable lesson when it came to relying on equestrians to draw the crowds, a lesson Caldwell of the St. Charles Theatre was just beginning to find out for himself. He had engaged Fogg & Stickney and was presenting circus performances exclusively. It was Caldwell's idea to divide the patronage of the town, and prevent the success of the American Theatre for a second year. He attributed Ludlow and Smith's previous success to the attraction of the horses. Fogg & Stickney were not only to perform in New Orleans, but they also were engaged to play in another of Caldwell's theatres in Mobile.<sup>50</sup>

It was obvious that two circuses could not compete in New Orleans for a long period of time, and the theatre managers knew this. Sol Smith again repeated his trip to Natchez as the troupe packed up their canvas and caught a steamboat north. Smith acted as the superintendent of financial affairs, and had not changed his mind about disliking circus life. As he looked out his window he saw snow on the canvas tent, and did not relish the sight.<sup>51</sup>

The circus was not going over well in Natchez, and he was of the opinion that the equestrians were "a dead weight to us here," and talked of going to Havana, Cuba. On January 4th, 1842, he wrote that they "would have been \$1000 better off if we had kept clear of equestrians altogether." Be that as it may, he stated that they should not plan to send any more performers to Natchez, and consider an alternate plan of going to Havana. One of the plans called for taking only the equestrians to Cuba and hiring musicians there, in this way the passage money could be saved. Smith was anxious to go somewhere for he stated "Something must be done, or we shall be undone!"<sup>52</sup>

Ludlow opposed the idea of sending the equestrians to Havana, and after Smith returned from Natchez he pointed out his objections. The expense of transporting the full stud of horses and riders, and their baggage there and back would be immense.



Furthermore there was a possibility that during rough weather they might lose a horse overboard. Notwithstanding a long debate on the question, Ludlow yielded, provided Smith was willing to go with them and take charge of the whole affair. This he agreed to as he had wished to visit Cuba for a long time.<sup>53</sup>

Early in February, 1842 Sol Smith embarked with the equestrian troupe for Havana. Bills were soon posted in town announcing that "los Cirque Olympique Americano" would soon open with the permission of the Captain General of Cuba. Among the performers listed were the equestrians; John Robinson, Levi North, Young Juan Hernandez, Eaton Stone, and Dennison Stone, while Otto Motty was the circus strongman. In addition to the star performers, there were about twenty other equestrians, and a host of grooms for the forty horses. After the usual inspection at the custom house, the troupe was landed upon Spanish soil. Rooms were arranged with the keeper of a boarding house, and Smith had to get use to his new name, as he was now to be called Don Sol Hermit.<sup>54</sup>

Smith and the circus were on foreign soil, and had to abide by local customs, and the presence of soldiers. The soldiers became a problem upon occasion, and Smith was well aware of their presence. The opening night of the "Cirque Olympique" a company of twenty soldiers marched up to the box office. The sergeant in charge reported that they had come under orders from the mayor to preserve order in the house, and to guard the box of the governor. For this service the sergeant expected an ounce of gold, and admission for his men. Smith informed the sergeant that they were welcome to guard the box of the governor, but not at his expense. Furthermore as far as Sol was concerned the whole company could march back to their quarters, "and keep out of my sight for the remainder of their natural lives." With that the detachment left, and returned to their quarters.<sup>55</sup>

The circus performed for two weeks in Havana, and it became apparent to Smith that it was a losing proposition. He decided to cut the four week engagement short, and called for the tent to be struck after the third week. All appeared to be going well, until it came time to pick up the troupe's passports for the return trip. The passports of the company were obtained, but that of Don Hermit was ordered held by the courts. The reason he could not leave was that a law prohibited any person obtaining a passport while there were any claims existing in the courts against him. Apparently someone had brought one against him.

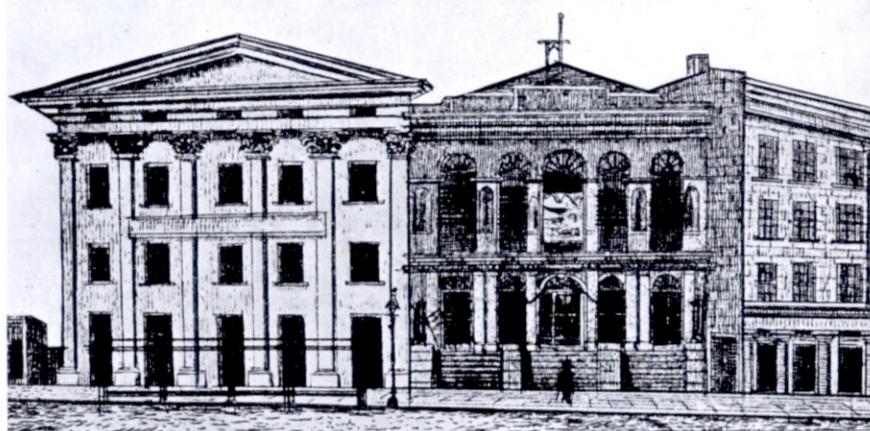
All the debts that the company in-



Samuel P. Stickney of the firm of Fogg and Stickney, who threatened Sol Smith after Smith tried to close his show. The hot-headed Stickney had one of the longest careers in the 19th century circus business. Pfening Archives.

currred in Cuba had been paid, and the problem came from one of the performers, Otto Motty, the strong man. He played with large cannon balls and would throw one weighing thirty pounds some ten or twelve feet in the air and catch it on the back of his neck. He would also hold a large field-piece on his shoulder while it was fired, and have two men with heavy hammers strike an anvil that was laid upon his chest. For his services he was to receive \$1000, but he had compromised with Smith and was to be paid \$750 for the three weeks in Havana, and \$250 for a week's performance in New Orleans.

Ludlow and Smith's American Theater in New Orleans where the John Robinson troupe, and the Fogg and Stickney Circus performed. Author's Collection.



The American Theater (center), from a sketch in *Gibson's Guide to the State of Louisiana*, New Orleans, 1838

Motty agreed to the plan at first, but soon went to the courts demanding the full amount, and thus held up Smith's passport. Unfortunately there was no proof of the compromise, and the original contract did state that it was to be fulfilled by a four week performance in Cuba. In an effort to clear the matter up, Smith sought out an official and after placing half an ounce of gold in his hand stated that he should arrest Otto Motty for breach of contract.<sup>56</sup>

What transpired was a night court appearance by both Smith and Motty before the mayor. Both cases were presented, with Motty demanding \$500, of which \$250 was rightly due him, while Smith demanded he perform a week in New Orleans before being paid. The mayor decided that the case must be arbitrated on the conditions that Smith could not compel Motty to leave the Spanish dominions, and Motty could not compel Smith to pay him for services not rendered. Smith was informed by the court clerk that if he would pay the court \$250, the amount rightly due Motty, the judgement against him would be satisfied and he would be entitled to his passport. The money was immediately forthcoming, but Motty still wanted his full thousand dollars. Smith pointed out that the court decree was final, and after the \$250 was paid, he was no longer liable for Motty's services and the case was closed.<sup>57</sup>

The only matter left was the question of who was to pay the court costs. Both Smith and Motty proclaimed that the other was to pay, but Smith had an idea. He wrote out a bill for transporting Motty's cannon balls from the ship and back again. The bill just happened to be the same amount as the court costs, and if Motty did not pay it his passport would be held up. Seeing his situation as serious, he paid the court costs without further question.<sup>58</sup>

The next day was spent getting the circus on board the steamer *Alabama* for the trip home to New Orleans. Late



in the afternoon Smith was getting ready to row out to the ship, and he was approached by Motty asking if he was late. Smith answered, "Late for what?," and went on board the steamer. Motty followed, but once aboard the equestrian manager, John Robinson told him to "Beware." Motty asked "Beware of what?," and he was informed that there was a chance that he would be thrown overboard with his cannon balls attached to his feet. An immediate decision was made, and the last boat to shore carried Otto Motty and his cannon balls away from the wrath of Sol Smith.<sup>59</sup>

The ship sailed without further incident and the circus arrived in New Orleans. It was now the end of February, 1842 and the thespians and equestrians only performed another month before the winter season at the American Theatre closed in early April. With the closing of the theatre, also came the end of the two year contract with the equestrians under John Robinson. Smith stated that the equestrians were good fellows, but he was still glad they were going.<sup>60</sup>

Ludlow and Smith got more than they bargained for when they engaged a circus, but it was something they would long remember.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated April 20, 1838, The Sol Smith Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri, hereafter cited as S.S.C.

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6. *Ibid.*
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8. Letter from A.L. Pickering to Ludlow & Smith dated August 16, 1840, S.S.C.
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10. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, p. 526.
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12. *Ibid.*
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14. *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, November 19, 1840.
15. George L. Chindahl, *A History of the Circus in America* (Caldwell: 1959), p. 43.
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17. Smith, *Theatrical Management*, p. 155.
18. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, p. 532.
19. *Ibid.* p. 533.
20. Sol Smith Memorandum Book dated January 21, 1841, S.S.C.
21. Memorandum Book, January 20-25, 1841, S.S.C.
22. Memorandum Book, January 26, 1841, S.S.C.
23. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated January 28, 1841, S.S.C.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated January 24, 1841, S.S.C.
26. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated January 28, 1841, S.S.C.
27. Smith, *Theatrical Management*, p. 155.
28. *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, February 26, 1841.
29. "The First Circus Elephants in America," *The White Tops*, December 1940.
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31. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated February 21, 1841, S.S.C.
32. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated April 19, 1841, S.S.C.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated April 22, 1841, S.S.C.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated April 19, 1841, S.S.C.
37. Letter from George Sergeant to Ludlow & Smith dated April 12, 1841, S.S.C.
38. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated April 22, 1841, S.S.C.
39. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated April 23, 1841, S.S.C.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated May 3, 1841, S.S.C.
44. Letter from M.C. Field to Ludlow dated May 14, 1841, S.S.C.
45. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated April 23, 1841, S.S.C.
46. Smith, *Theatrical Management*, p. 157.
47. *Ibid.* p. 159.
48. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, p. 544.
49. Smith, *Theatrical Management*, p. 161.
50. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, p. 546.
51. Smith, *Theatrical Management*, p. 161.
52. Letter from Smith to Ludlow dated January 4, 1842, S.S.C.
53. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, p. 548.
54. Smith, *Theatrical Management*, p. 162.
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56. *Ibid.*
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.* p. 164.
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.* p. 166.

## ART "DOC" MILLERS

### "Little Ol' Show, A comin' Down the Road"

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Leon Fredricks,  | Editor American Showman: Very detailed description of the old horse & wagon shows. Belongs in historical files.   |
| Louise Rubin,    | co-editor Film Classics: A warm nostalgic look at life on a small circus in the early days.   |
| Chet Vradenburg, | Secy 'The Carouselle': The book will open your eyes to life on a small wagon show. There are things sad enough to make you cry and have you howling in stitches. The twenty pages of rare pictures are priceless.   |
| Harry Chipman,   | retired circus press agent: It's terrific!, will be assured of preservation in the annals of circus history.  |
| Ken Danner,      | San Bernardino (50 years a trouper) This book is very interesting and factual. I have bought many so-called circus books, but after reading a few pages, realized the author never spent a day as a trouper.        |
| Todd Davenport,  | Townville, Pa.: It's all true adventure. Many of the incidents parallel my own life as a kid on Al Anderson's little show out of Gowanda, N.Y. and my season with Elmer Jone's 2 car Cooper Bros. Circus in Canada. |

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# Star Back Review

*Circus Baggage Stock*, by Charles Philip Fox. (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Company, 1983).

Chappie Fox, well known to all fans and troupers alike, has come forth with another volume to add to his already impressive list of circus books spanning a period of over thirty-five years. Many will feel his latest, *Circus Baggage Stock*, subtitled "A Tribute to the Percheron Horse," may well be his finest.

This story of one of the most interesting aspects of bygone circus days will provide an education to virtually every reader because, after all, Cole Bros. in 1940 was the last show to carry baggage stock in any sizeable numbers, and that was some forty-three years ago. Even those, including this reviewer, who can remember with fond affection seeing baggage horses in action on the great railroad circuses of the 1920s and 1930s never did get around to learning the details of their routine, which was one of the grandest sights of circus day. We saw the horses unloaded, hitched to baggage wagons, then followed their journey to the lot where we marveled at the incredible way the six and eight hitches could maneuver wagons, but we never did learn exactly how this was done. As for the breed of horse, most would answer, "Why dapple grays, just like the press man said."

The publisher has done a beautiful job with the layout, text, and illustrations, and the book is practically the same format and same size as *The Circus Moves by Rail* by Fox and Tom Parkinson. It is divided into twelve chapters of moderate length text with each profusely illustrated with photographs, over 350 in all.

Many readers may agree with this reviewer that the best part of the book is the use the author makes of the correspondence he received over many years from sixteen former long-string drivers, including well known names such as Jake Posey, Henry "Apples" Welsh, David "Deacon" Blanchfield, Mike Tschudy, E.L. "Spike" Hansen, and Frank Updegrove. The beauty of this is that the author lets these former drivers tell their story in their own way without unnecessary editing



or condensation. Some letters spread over one or more pages, and contain everything from the everyday routine in the life of a long string driver and his horses to the unusual, the accidents, weather headaches, and lot problems. Some letters include their life history in show business, with names, dates, and places of circuses they were on. Most letters mention other drivers, the bosses, and some of their horses by name. Each letter has its own little story. All make fascinating reading.

The book deals primarily with bag-

gage stock associated with the railroad circus from 1872 when P.T. Barnum's show went on rails until Cole Bros. in 1940. During the remainder of the 1940s, some rail shows continued to use a few horses for train teams, to pull various floats in the spec, or for downtown bally. Some lasted into the 1950s, but when the canvas railroad show disappeared in 1956 so did baggage stock.

When the circus went on rails a different breed of horses was needed, a more powerful, draft type, to handle heavier wagons than those used by the overland shows. The Percheron was found to be best for circus work by the boss hostlers. The book points out that it was not until the 1920s and 1930s, when the motor age caused the draft horses population to tumble, that shows found it difficult to obtain Percherons, and they had to resort to using some Belgians. Circus draft stock were generally grade type geldings, rarely mares or purebreds; the Percherons were either gray or black while the few Belgians were sorrel, chestnut, or roan in color. By far most of the Percherons were gray. Will Brock, who drove an eight-up for Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth, in a letter to the author, wrote that day after day the horsemen had to answer the same questions put to them by towners, one of which was, "Why are the horses mostly gray?" Brock would answer, "The horses are gray because they are Percherons, for they are best adapted to the circus of all breeds."





Clydesdales weren't used as they were considered too leggy and clumsy afoot. Suffolks were too small. Belgians were inclined to be too heavy, were too slow afoot, and gave up too easily. Shires were just too big and could not step lively enough to keep the heavy loads moving under tough conditions as did the quick-footed Percherons. Ringling-Barnum did have a rare four horse team of Clydesdales in the mid 1940s, and a photo in the book shows the team pulling the bell wagon in the 1945 spec.

The author sums up the circus baggage horse: "Among all the horses that worked for a living in the horse-drawn era of this country's development the circus draft horse comes nearest to perfection. The baggage stock had brains and common sense. They moved the show on a daily basis, regardless of the weather. They were handy, gentle, good-looking, and strong. Mostly they were Percherons."

The book covers all aspects of baggage stock. Various chapters cover the men who handled the stock, from the boss hostler and his assistants to the four, six and eight hitch drivers. Also covered are the baggage wagons and how the horses moved them. Each piece of hardware on the wagon that was used in any way by the team is noted, and illustrated with photos. One interesting chapter tells how the stock was loaded and unloaded in the rail cars. The movement to and from the lot, and the work done on the lot are described in another. A special part is devoted to the problems of the soft lot, whether it be mud or sand. Another tells how the stock was housed in the horse tops. One chapter tells of the extra burden that fell on the baggage horses in the days of the street parade. Even the story of the stock in winterquarters is told.

The last chapter recounts the story of the great Schlitz Circus Parade in Milwaukee, 1963-1973, in which Fox was personally so involved. Much previously unpublished data is given, including a listing of the team owner, composition, address, and wagon pulled in the final march of 1973. Another interesting list gives the age, weight, height, name, and position of each horse in the re-creation of the famous forty horse team during the final days of the parade.

Most of the great array of photographs are previously unpublished, and will be new to the vast majority of viewers. The author pulls many shots from his files which he personally took from the mid 1930s until the final days of baggage stock. Of special interest is the superb selection of photos taken by Frank Updegrove, a long string driver on Ringling-Barnum for several seasons beginning in 1924. These have never been circulated before except in rare instances,

and the reader will be completely fascinated when he sees what it was like when the Big Show relied almost completely on horse power back in the mid 1920s. Each illustration contains an informative outline which adds to its historical effectiveness.

Yes indeed, Chappie Fox's new book is an education. For all of us.

Joe Bradbury



*Bertram Mills Circus*, by Cyril Bertram Mills. (Bath, England: Ashgrove Press, 1983).

To those fortunate enough to have experienced it before its demise, Bertram Mills Circus epitomized the finest in twentieth-century British circus. Founded by its namesake in 1920, and carried on by him and then his sons Cyril and Bernard until the winter of 1965-66, it was famed above all for its annual winter seasons at London's great exhibition hall, Olympia. In time the circus also tented during the summer months—moving at first by road, and then by rail—visiting towns throughout Britain and Ireland. Its fast paced programs (the Mills were notorious for cutting acts so as to retain only their best features) reg-

ularly included the most outstanding European and American artists; and so great was the reputation of Bertram Mills Circus for quality, elegance, and a dignified style of presentation that it quickly became a favorite with all levels of society, up to and including Elizabeth II and all the members of the royal family.

Here is the history of that circus, as originally told by Cyril Bertram Mills in 1967, but now reissued in a handy paperback with new illustrations and an additional chapter. In the last the author provides some interesting new information about the finances and expenses of Bertram Mills Circus; discusses the current state of British circuses and some of the problems which they face; and offers some cogent remarks on the influence of television, which is also the subject of a separate chapter earlier in the book. One gathers from what he writes that the ubiquitous tube poses more of a threat to circus-going in Britain than it does in America. Ironically, the first circus to be televised, in 1937, was Bertram Mills Circus.

One of the more fascinating things about Bertram Mills Circus is that it was founded, almost on a dare, by a person with no previous experience in circuses or show business. Bertram Mills was obviously an astute businessman, however, who operated on the sound principle of giving his patrons the best entertainment money could buy. Among the many artists who appeared in his circus were such stars as Alfredo Codona and Lillian Leitzel; Victor Gaona, who did the "triple" during the 1965-66 season at Olympia; Coco the Clown and Charlie Rivels; Lilly Yokoi and the Great Wallendas; horses trained by the Truzzi and Schumann families; Togare and Captain Alfred with their cats; and even the perennial Merle Evans. An obvious advantage of running a winter, holiday circus at Olympia was that performers who were under contract to other circuses for the summer months were then usually free to work for Mills.

Cyril Mills himself eventually acted as "scout" in both Europe and America, searching out top talent in even the remotest areas. On his annual tours of Europe, he writes, he sometimes visited as many as fifty circuses in forty to forty-five days, journeying through some dozen countries for a total distance of nine or ten thousand miles. An enviable job, one might think—until one reads the problems he often encountered. Not the least interesting feature of his book is what he has to say about many of these Continental circuses and their sometimes eccentric directors (his remarks on Sarrasani are particularly funny). His comments on circuses in East European countries, and his condemnation

**Circus Baggage Stock is available from Pruett Publishing Company, Dept. C, 2928 Pearl St., Boulder, Colorado 80301, price \$34.95. Bertram Mills Circus is available from Ashgrove Press, 26 Gay Street, Bath, BA1, 2PD, England, price \$8.80 surface mail; \$13.30 air mail. Prices on both books include postage.**



of the "lunge" or safety wire many soviet artists rely on to perform feats that otherwise would be well nigh impossible, are as apropos today as when they were first written. Even more so, to my way of thinking, are his answers to those fanatics who would bar all performing animals from circuses and who have recently extended their attacks to zoos and animals parks. If anyone still believes animals are taught through cruelty and made to perform "unnatural" tricks, an illuminating chapter on "The Training of Circus Animals" should help to combat this erroneous impression.

Of course, the author also has a few complaints in voice about American circuses—in particular the obstreperous hawking by candy butchers that goes on in many of our circuses while the program is in progress, and the abuses and shoddy entertainment that often result from "sponsored" circuses. To these and most of the other objections he raises, the majority of American readers will cry "Amen," although I daresay not all of us are prepared to give up our beloved three rings. Bertram Mills Circus always followed the one-ring format, of course, and some of its numbers—that of a

famous pickpocket named Borra, for instance—would have little chance of succeeding here.

In other ways, however, Bertram Mills Circus was not so dissimilar to its American cousins, especially in regard to its "Fun Fair" and sideshow attractions run in connection with the circus while it was playing at Olympia. Americans familiar with the history of P.T. Barnum and the hoaxes he perpetrated will be amused to learn that twentieth-century Britishers have proved no less gullible than their transatlantic counterparts. If Barnum had Joice Heth, the "161-year-old nurse of George Washington," and a forged bill of sale to prove it, Mills exhibited Zaro Agha, said to be 156 years old, and offered a Turkish passport as supporting evidence. If Barnum unavailingly offered a reward of \$20,000 for the capture of a sea serpent or "Champ," the hero of Lake Champlain, the senior Mills was no less intrigued by the Loch Ness Monster and offered 20,000 pounds for its capture. At other times the Mills sideshow exhibited such standard attractions as giants and midgets and the "Ugliest Woman in the World" (she had originally applied for a po-

sition as charwoman). There were American importations as well, including Gargantua in his air-conditioned cage, an embalmed whale known as "Eric," and a patent fraud named Ross, who had so perfected control of his body that he passed for a "mechanical man" or robot, until one cold, damp evening his breath became visible and he had to be declared "out of order." The author himself was often in quest of anyone who could perform the Indian Rope Trick and offered a 10,000-pound reward for this sensation. As might be expected, there were no takers.

But the circus itself—its fortunes and vicissitudes—remains the focus of the book, and here one is privileged to be let into the thinking of one who managed and directed it for most of his working life. Cyril Mills has written this history with authority and candidness, acknowledging mistakes as well as recording his and his family's triumphs. To historians and anyone else with an interest in the circus, the merit and value of his excellently written book will be immediately apparent.

A.H. Saxon

## BILL KASISKA'S LETTERHEADS



When the Barnum and Bailey Circus played its famous date at London's Olympia during the winter of 1889-1890, the letterhead emphasized the senior partner and the spec. The Nero pageant was presented on the road in America for two seasons after its try-out in England. The words "P.T. Barnum's," and "Nero, or the Destruction of Rome" are in gold; the rest of the letter paper is in black. It was printed by the Courier Lithograph Company of Buffalo, New York.



# CIRCUS BANK AND TREASURER'S CHECKS

Like any other business a circus paid its bills with checks. Not all bills, however, were paid with bank checks. Local suppliers were issued "treasurer's" checks which were presented for payment at the ticket wagon on show day.

Large invoices from lithograph firms and railroads were paid by bank checks which were also used to pay bills during the winter months while a show was in quarters. They were printed by commercial check printers, while the treasurer's checks were printed by litho firms along with various other business forms. The bank checks were on safety paper; the others were on standard paper.

The Mighty Haag check is signed by Ernest Haag; the Ringling-Barnum 1949 check is signed by Henry Ringling North; the Hagenbeck-Wallace & Forepaugh Sells 1937 check is signed by Ralph Clawson, who was in charge of the Peru winter quarters. The 1911 Barnum & Bailey check is signed by John Ringling. All checks are from the Pfening Archives.

**RINGLING BROS. AND BARNUM & BAILEY COMBINED SHOWS**

No. 1736

SARASOTA, FLORIDA, April 9, 1949

Pay to the order of Weldon, Williams and Lick \$269.05

269 DOLLARS

TO MANUFACTURERS TRUST COMPANY  
55 BROAD STREET  
NEW YORK 55

PER Henry Ringling North ASST. TREASURER

**HAGENBECK - WALLACE AND FOREPAUGH-SELLS BROS. Combined Shows**

No. 887

PERU, IND., March 30 1937

Pay to the order of G. A. Jones Hardware Co. \$47.39

47 DOLLARS

TO WABASH VALLEY TRUST COMPANY  
71-175 PERU, INDIANA

PER Ralph J. Clawson

**MILLER BROS. REAL WILD WEST AND GREAT FAR EAST**

No. 192

At Sight Pay To \$ 100

OR ORDER

DOLLARS

FOR VALUE RECEIVED AND CHARGE TO THE ACCOUNT OF

TO SECURITY STATE BANK  
PONCA CITY, OKLAHOMA

MILLER BROS.

**THE MIGHTY HAAG SHOWS**

PERMANENTLY LOCATED AT SHREVEPORT, LA.

11/12/20 1920

Pay to the order of L E Haag \$5.00

Five Dollars

To the COMMERCIAL NAT'L BANK 84-1  
SHREVEPORT, LA.

No. 3545

PER Ernest Haag



**Barnum & Bailey**  
Greatest Show on Earth

No. 2355

BRIDGEPORT, CONN. *April 26* 191*1*

PAY TO THE ORDER OF *Jessiah Reilly* \$*783*<sup>*66*</sup>

*Seven hundred, eighty three and 66/100* DOLLARS

TO THE PEQUONNOCK NATIONAL BANK, BRIDGEPORT, CONN.

PER *J. W. R. [Signature]*

**GENTRY BROS.' FAMOUS SHOWS UNITED.**

TREASURER: *[Signature]* 1900.

PAY TO \_\_\_\_\_ or bearer, \_\_\_\_\_ DOLLARS

for \_\_\_\_\_ loaves of one day old bread, at \_\_\_\_\_ per loaf, if delivered to Steward at Car No. 2 by \_\_\_\_\_ A. M. on \_\_\_\_\_ Agent.

This Check is loaned by Gentry's G. M. and is presented at Ticket Wagon at 2 P. M.

**ROBBINS BROS. CIRCUS**

No. A 251 *Rome Va. Aug 24* 1931

TREASURER ROBBINS BROS. CIRCUS: *[Signature]* \$*4680*

PAY TO THE ORDER OF *General Patton* DOLLARS

ACCOUNT OF *Fifty six Aug 9 1900*

*12 Panels @ \$390*

*W. J. [Signature]* AGENT

PRESENT CHECK FOR PAYMENT AT TICKET WAGON ON DAY OF EXHIBITION BETWEEN 2 AND 3 P. M. NOT GOOD FOR BORROWED MONEY

**SELLS FLOTO CIRCUS**  
ADVANCE DEPARTMENT

**Duplicate**  
NOT NEGOTIABLE

March 12, 1930 00 192

PAY TO THE ORDER OF *The New York Central Railroad Company* \$*75.00*

*Seventy five and no/100* DOLLARS

TO THE **Wabash Valley Trust Company**  
PERU, INDIANA [71-475]

**SELLS FLOTO CIRCUS**  
Traffic Manager

**SPARKS' SHOWS**

TREASURY DEPARTMENT

Aug. 4 1911

Pay to the order of *C. L. [Signature]*

*Twelve hundred and no/100* Dollars, \$*1200*

*Agent of 1915 Adv 7c*

PAYABLE AT TICKET WAGON  
EXPIRES AUGUST 10 1911  
1910 RELEASE SHOWS 10 AM P. M.

**COLE BROTHERS' WORLD-TOURED SHOWS**

No. A \_\_\_\_\_

TREASURER COLE BROS. SHOWS:

PAY TO \_\_\_\_\_ OR ORDER

THE SUM OF \_\_\_\_\_ DOLLARS

ON ACCOUNT OF \_\_\_\_\_

THIS CHECK MUST BE PRESENTED AT TICKET WAGON BETWEEN 2 AND 3 P. M. ON DATE OF EXHIBITION, AND CAN BE PAID IN SILVER

**CHECK**

**THE MANAGER WILL NOT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR BORROWED MONEY**

*2-13-17* 191

AGENT \_\_\_\_\_

Erle Litho. & Printing Co., Erie, Pa.



# Back for Seconds

Circus fans from all over the globe snatched up the first printing of Bev. Kelley's new book, *It Was Better Than Work*, almost before the ink was dry. Now it is back in print. There should be enough to last until Christmas, but no promises.

Order your copy — today!

"It is said — by Bev Kelley, no less — that the worst thing to befall a press agent is for him to become the news story himself, outscoring the show he fronts. Well, in his latest book, Kelley is both the agent and the show. Rightly, he and his yarns are the main feature. . . .

"... the circus still holds center ring in this book. Kelley tells about his stint with the John Robinson show, heading up press work for Hagenbeck-Wallace, originating the Ringling-Barnum radio publicity department, then serving as chief of the Big One's entire press department. . . .

"Names? The list is endless in Bev's book. Names were his stock in trade; he helped build them. And his products included Leitzel, Codona, Wallenda, Zacchini, Kelly, and many more. Equally, he tells about the names that were not on the wagons or in the billing but who made the circus a living thing — the bosses, operating chiefs, and main-stays. . . .

"His story includes the giraffe-necked women, the Ubangis, Gargantua, Felix Adler, Jack Earl, and Alice from Dallas. . . .

"... [In the] Hartford fire, . . . Kelley demonstrated expertise in sensing the public's attitudes and how best to cope with them. He knew that after a century of circus boasting it was time for the show to reverse its stance and become humble.

In that he did a lot for the circus, maybe saved it. . . .

"It Was Better Than Work is a welcome addition to the bookshelf of memoirs by the powerful personalities that gave the circus its vitality."

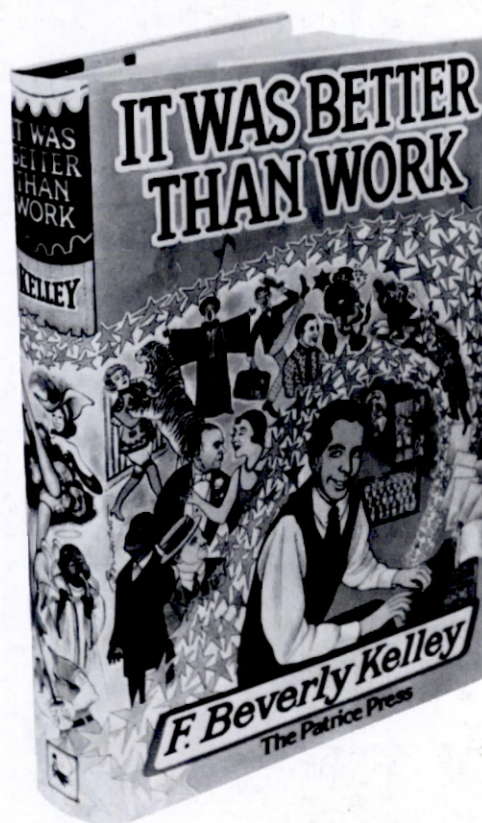
— Tom Parkinson  
Bandwagon

"There's a gem of a book of reminiscences just out called *It Was Better Than Work*, by F. Beverly Kelley, the last of the scholarly press agents.

"His longtime friend and fellow alumnus of Ohio Wesleyan University, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, he of *The Power of Positive Thinking* fame, wrote the introduction.

"Here is a great book for every American boy or girl from 9 to 90," Peale writes. "He is unequalled as a raconteur and lends to the material the charm of an extraordinary personality."

— Peter Bellamy  
Cleveland Plain Dealer



"Through the years, Kelley has soothed egos and cheered lonely hearts. He has ridden down the show road with Frank Buck and the legendary Gargantua, Maria Rasputin, the 'Mad Monk's' daughter, with fat ladies and midgets and exotic animals, with pygmies and performing bears, with giants and gorillas and the giraffe-neck women."

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